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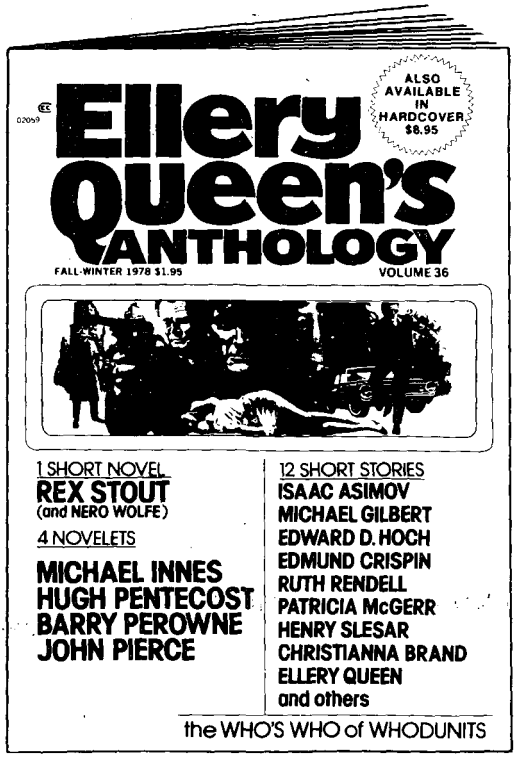

EXTRA COUPON ON PAGE 67

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Next Issue On Sale November 2

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine ®

THE LONG DARK STREET	Thomas Walsh	6
CHARLIE IN MOSCOW	Brian Garfield	23
THE EYES OF THE OKAPI	Michael Talbot	35
HIP TO THE TRIP	John Storm Roberts	42
THIS IS DEATH	Donald E. Westlake	48
TRIAL AND ERROR	D. O. Bell	61
NATURE'S WAY	Dave Thornburg	68
GOING BACKWARD	David Ely	76
DOVER WITHOUT PERKS	Joyce Porter	98
THE FIRST OF ALL RULES	Ernest Savage	116
THE WAGER	Robert L. Fish	131
THE PROBLEM OF THE REVIVAL TENT	Edward D. Hoch	140
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	Otto Penzler & Chris Steinbrunner	90
THE JURY BOX	Jon L. Breen	93

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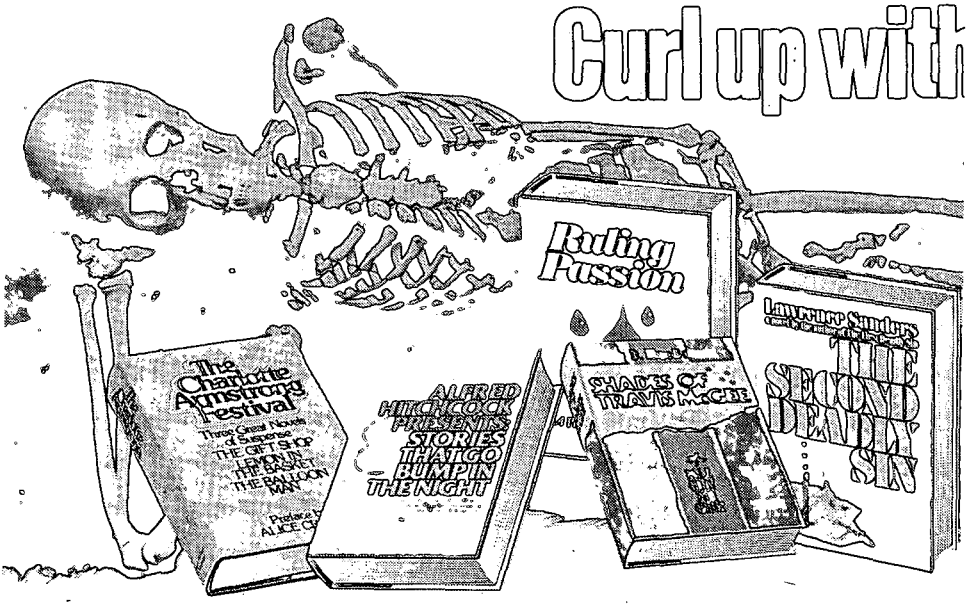
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THE LONG DARK STREET

by THOMAS WALSH

From all that Riley was permitted to see of her, the Princess Natasha was a slight, very dark woman. Jet-black hair, cut short but frizzy almost down to the skull; glittering jet-black eyes; a complexion, perhaps a little too sharply contrasted against such coloring, that had the thickness and yellowness of old leather; and a first striking impression that she now had only a tiny spark of life left in her, a spark guarded by the fiercest and most desperate care. After her first glance at him—there was only one—she lay on the chaise longue looking wearily over the fall greenery of Central Park, and with no preliminaries or introductions, not even asking his name, she said what she wanted him to do for her.

So it was the briefest possible interview, no more than two or three minutes in all, and during it she moved nothing but her hands, all ringed and braceleted. They reached for one cigarette, crushed it out after a puff or two, and then for another. They stroked down the soft yellow blanket over her knees. They rested for an instant on the right arm of the chaise longue, then on the left. They were never still—and all the while, after that first glance, she kept watching the other side of the park, and not Riley.

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On his part he kept his eyes on the hands. He could not help it. They struck him as the most rapacious hands he had ever seen, with their incessant restlessness and irritability of movement. He got the impression they had been made for only one thing—to reach out for life, and then to shape and manage it just as she ordered. Once or twice they fussed with a buttonhole on her heavily embroidered Chinese peignoir, or touched her chin, her earlobes, or the wasted yellow scrawniness of her throat. It was rather difficult to tell her age, but Riley guessed she was no more than 48 or 50. It was less difficult to realize that in all likelihood she was a dying woman.

Quite clear also was her bitter but somehow defensive indifference to him, Zero Jack Riley. It would have been simple for her to offer some sort of covering explanation, whether true or not, but she did not bother. Her secretary, Riley learned, would furnish him with the necessary information on the way out. Meanwhile, the hands moved; she kept looking out over the park, not at him; and the husky voice with a suggestion of carefully cultivated foreign accent let him know in the plainest and curtest manner what Riley was being ordered to do for her. But the pretender in such accents, Riley knew, was always more natural and convincing than the genuine article. It was a touch too careful. Over the years it had been acquired with much practise.

And what the Princess Natasha wanted, if it proved possible, was for Riley to discover the whereabouts of a certain individual. If successful, he was not to approach the individual in any way, or even to announce himself. He was only to report back to the Princess Natasha personally with the information he had secured, and to no one else. He was experienced in such matters?

"I guess maybe a little," Riley told her. He was a big, slightly overweight man with thick eyebrows and rather dull eyes that gave him a somewhat clodlike stupidity of expression, which on occasion was very useful since in the work he did he was not stupid at all. "Twenty years on the force here, before I went out on pension and took up agency work. Last fourteen on the force in the Missing Persons Bureau."

She said nothing to that, since it had of course been a rhetorical question. With the Princess Natasha, Riley felt sure, his background and qualifications would already have been carefully checked. But her right hand touched the side of her face, then flung itself away from it, as if she had come into contact with

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something so helpless, so loathsomely repulsive to her that she could not endure the knowledge of it.

Warm October sunshine glittered on her rings and bracelets, and 24 stories below them Fifth Avenue traffic droned quietly along under the penthouse terrace. Nothing more was said by either of them. Her head dropped wearily against the back of the chaise longue, and still without looking at him she brushed the fingers of her right hand in his direction. Interview concluded, Riley understood; off, off.

So he moved quietly back into the apartment, not even having been asked to sit down, and found three other people there in a far corner of the shadowed living room. One was the Princess Natasha's personal secretary, an awkward, jumpily nervous woman named Miss Cotter; one was the husband, a very good-looking younger man with an air of almost effeminate petulance; and one was a Mr. La Salle, the company official of Princess Natasha Cosmetics who had first interviewed Riley yesterday afternoon.

They were murmuring together, but the conversation stopped when they saw Riley. Mr. La Salle, lowering cold dark eyes, rubbed a polished thumbnail over a dark little mustache; the husband gave Riley a vague, patently forced smile; and Miss Cotter jumped clumsily to her feet and led the way out to the elevator.

"I was told you'd give me the necessary information," Riley reminded her there, after ringing. He sounded mild and patient about it because another impression he had received was that Miss Cotter looked like an easily flustered and not too intelligent woman. "I mean whatever you have on this thing. She didn't even say who she wanted me to find."

"Who?" Miss Cotter said, anxiously tilting her head in the direction of the terrace. She must have done that many times before, since it was now an automatic reaction; but then, Riley suspected, the Princess Natasha was not a woman you kept waiting very long if you had even half a brain in your head. "What information? I don't quite—oh, yes. Oh, yes, Mr. Riley. Just a moment."

She fluttered back out of the living room as the elevator came up and handed Riley an envelope with a single sheet of paper inside. On the way down he read the three lines that had been typed out on the sheet. One line was a name—Elizabeth Ann Wil-

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liams; one was a date of birth—October 3, 1946; and the third, apparently, was the place of birth—Springfield, Massachusetts.

The next morning Riley drove up there and arrived in plenty of time to check first at the Bureau of Vital Statistics. The birth certificate of Elizabeth Ann Williams gave the mother's name as Isabella M. Williams, and the father's name as Robert F. McComas. There were two different street addresses, and a Mrs. J. Albert McComas was still listed in the Springfield phone book at the one given for Robert F.

But no luck there.

"Mr. Robert McComas?" an over-cultivated servant's voice repeated in some surprise at the other end of the line. "Oh, no. I'm very sorry, sir. I'm afraid that Mr. McComas died more than twenty years ago. In the Air Force, I believe. There is only his mother residing here now. No, Madam is traveling in Europe at the moment. But if you wish to call back after November eighth—"

"Guess I'll have to," Riley said. "If it proves necessary. Okay. Thanks a lot."

There were a lot of Williamses in the phone book but no Isabella M., and none with an addrress matching that on the birth certificate. So Riley got back into his car and drove over there, and found the address to be a shabby street in a shabby section. On each side was a row of dreary, rundown wooden apartments, all badly in need of paint, and every one with a rickety outside flight of wooden steps leading to the upper floors. Number 349 was as dingy as all the rest, and of the six families now living inside not one—thirty-odd years ago, after all—remembered an Isabella Williams or her daughter Elizabeth.

There was no luck either at 347, 345, 351, or 353. Only down at the corner, in a rat-trap neighborhood grocery, which looked as if it might have been there in the year 1846, let alone 1946, was Riley able to pick up his first lead.

But a Mr. Beniquez, who looked about as old as his business establishment, gave Riley a sardonically knowing scrutiny before he admitted anything. He had a bad leg and a spiteful manner; he wore a dirty apron and had the stub of a cheap cigar in his mouth; and before answering he spat down sideways behind his cold-meat counter while showing Riley the hint of a sly grin under a gray handlebar mustache.

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Riley could see at once that the grin was smugly satisfied with itself. The man announced that he knew something, and that he might, or might not, be prepared to admit that he did. So Riley decided on a little cold shock, just to get started: a proper authority on the one hand and a proper submission on the other. He felt they would be the best possible tactics with Mr. Beniquez. It was another humid October day, and a refrigerator with cans of cold beer in it was built into the back wall.

"Might be able to use one of those," Riley began, but with no urgency at all. Urgency would have been foolish with Mr. Beniquez. He must not be asked immediately for straight answers—it would be a waste of time. He must be made willing and even eager to give them. "Like to join me?"

"Don't mind if I do," Mr. Beniquez said, briskly removing two cans. "Indian summer, all right. Williams, you said. Williams, eh? Kind of a common name, mister. Let's see now."

After which, quite as Riley expected, he made a great show of rubbing his forehead, wrinkling his eyelids, and thinking back futilely. Mr. Beniquez was in command and he intended to keep in command for as long as possible. Mr. Beniquez was enjoying himself.

"Well, old Eddie Williams," he got out finally. "Lived somewhere down the street in those days, way I remember. You got the address?"

"349," Riley repeated stolidly. "But I'm interested in an Isabella Williams and her daughter Elizabeth. Would they have any connection with this old Eddie?"

Mr. Beniquez, appearing to be more uncertain than ever, took the cigar stub out of his mouth and rubbed off a soiled butcher block with one corner of his dirty apron.

"Tell you how it is," he announced craftily. "Seventy-three last birthday—so sometimes I remember real good and sometimes I don't. All depends. Another fellow came in here about a month ago and asked a helper of mine the same thing—Isabella Williams. But he sweetened the pot a little, he did. Threw Joey a ten, just to start out with."

"Oh?" Riley said, making no move as yet to follow suit. It was always better to get the dog to sit up first, then give it the morsel. "What other fellow? What did he want to know about Isabella Williams for?"

"Couldn't tell you," Mr. Beniquez said, grin still lurking. "Joey

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talked to him, and Joey was just temporary here when I got myself laid up with this damn arthritis."

"Then maybe I better talk to Joey, eh? Where is he?"

"Couldn't tell you that, either," Mr. Beniquez said, cackling slyly. "One of them drifters, mister. What I did, I bounced him right out soon as a customer told me about him taking the ten. Kept it for himself, see? And of course he couldn't tell the guy a damned thing. Wasn't even born in 1946. But what do you want to know about this Isabella Williams for—if I could remember anything at all, of course."

Riley did not answer the question. Instead, he nodded his head at the beer permit up over the refrigerator case.

"Think we're both breaking the law," he remarked. "Read your permit up there. It says you can buy beer in here if you take it out. What you can't do is drink it on the premises."

"Well, sure," Mr. Beniquez said, losing his grin. "Let's go into the back room, huh? Skipped my mind."

But Riley moved over by the front door where he was in plain view from the street and drank again.

"Hey!" Mr. Beniquez said anxiously. "Don't do that. They'll see you from Jock's Tavern over there and they'll put in a complaint against me. Come on, will you?"

"You think so?" Riley said, and opened the door, putting the open beer can in plain sight. "But what were we talking about just now? Oh, yes, Isabella Williams, wasn't it?"

Mr. Beniquez limped out savagely from behind the counter.

"All right, all right," he said. "If you come back here and close the door. Give me a chance, can't you? She was old Eddie's daughter and the damnedest little hellraiser we ever had in this neighborhood. Only sixteen or seventeen then, but out with a different fellow every night in the week—long as they had money. Got herself in trouble finally by some rich kid out of Longmeadow. Wouldn't marry her, of course. Why should he? That's the reason they moved away from here."

Riley closed the door then. Time for the morsel? He moved back to the butcher block, put a ten-dollar bill down, but kept his hand on it.

"Where did they move to?"

"Over the state line to Connecticut," Mr. Beniquez said, dropping his eyes to the bill, but not reaching for it. "Thought they could keep it quiet that way, only like fun. Soon as the kid was

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born, the daughter got the hell out of there, dumping it all on old Eddie. No damned good, that's all. Guess she hit out for New York or somewhere. Never saw her again. Never wanted to."

"Then that's too bad," Riley said, picking up the bill. "Sorry to say that kind of information isn't worth a plugged nickel to me. Hard lines, eh?"

"Wait a minute," Mr. Beniquez muttered venomously. It was necessary for him to hit out at someone, if not at Riley, then at the easier target of the Williams family. "He had me hung up for forty-eight dollars on old grocery bills, and that was a hell of a lot of money in those days. So soon as I found out where he was living over in Connecticut I went down there and made him pay me a few dollars every month on what he owed. Like pulling teeth with that kind of a deadbeat. Took me years."

"Years," Riley murmured. "And the little girl was with him all that time?"

"With him and some tramp he was living with then," Mr. Beniquez almost spat. "Only she went and took up with some bartender from Holyoke, and Eddie had to get rid of the kid. So what he did, he boarded it out with some woman down there. You know what they call a baby farm?"

Riley put back the bill, but still kept his hand on it. He said nothing at all. He just waited.

"Well, place like that," Mr. Beniquez said, one side of his mouth twisted down. "Big fat woman ran it. Name of Pilling or Palling, I think; something like that. But I guess he didn't pay the board like he should, any more than he paid me. So one night I'm down there trying to squeeze out another couple of bucks when I see her there too, banging on the door and holding the little kid by the hand. Raining like hell, around November, I think, but he wouldn't even let them in. Just opened the upstairs window and yelled down at them. 'Get the hell out of here,' I heard him screaming. 'And you can take that brat with you right back to Bobby McComas. That's where it belongs!'

"Who the hell wanted it, see? Not the fat woman, if she wasn't paid. Not old Eddie, and not even the mother, way she walked out on it. Nobody. Kid was only three or four years old then. Nice thing, huh? They had to walk away in all that rain, with the kid bawling and the fat woman almost shaking the guts out of it at every step, like she hated it too. But that was old Eddie. Drunk again, and wouldn't even let them in in that weather."

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Which was about all Riley could get about the Williams family. When he was out in his car again, although he was not a sensitive or emotional man, he could easily see the whole thing. Month of November; an icy rain falling; a long dark street in some forlorn Connecticut town; and a child of about three or four sobbing helplessly to itself because there was no one else. A drunken voice hated her; the fat woman hated her; and the only door she knew had not been opened. Was she old enough to have remembered it? Riley, a devoted family man himself, could only hope not.

All the way over to the Springfield Public Library on State Street he could hear Riley muttering savagely to Riley under his breath. But it gave him a certain idea about Isabella Williams, and if the latest copy of *Who's Who* in the library did not prove out that idea, at least it made it theoretically possible.

In the library he learned that the Princess Natasha Ilyanov, founder and president of the Princess Natasha Cosmetics line, had been born in Peking, China, and privately educated in London and Paris. In 1949 she had settled in America, and in 1963 *Time* had nominated her the Woman of the Year. But it seemed to him that *Who's Who* would hardly bother to check back on the information furnished by a Princess, leaving her to say whatever she wanted—and of course Peking, China, and "privately educated" would cover a multitude of sins. Isabella M. Williams was anybody's name. On the other hand, Princess Natasha Ilyanov might have been made up for the cosmetics business—and probably had been.

He put back *Who's Who,* remembering that Fifth Avenue penthouse terrace, but not even caring to imagine what Princess Natasha might have been thinking about yesterday afternoon. He and his wife Molly had a whole houseful of kids, two years to nineteen, and Riley would have had to admit that he belted every one of them when and if necessary. But to not open a door for one of them and to scream down, whatever the circumstances, the thing that had been screamed down at Elizabeth Ann Williams . . .

"What's the matter?" the librarian asked him. "What did you say, sir?"

"Nothing," Riley told her. "Nothing at all, ma'am. Thank you."

He drove south then to the small town in Connecticut that Mr. Beniquez had mentioned and found a Mrs. Victoria Pallen, close enough, still listed in the phone book. Mr. Beniquez had called her a fat woman, but she was not fat now. She was huge, almost

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unbelievable. Her belly was like a grossly overstuffed pillow; her arms, in a prim gray dress, were fat as thighs; and her eyes, a tranquilly clear greenish gray, were as cold and unflinching as any he had ever seen in his 20 years on the force.

What surprised him, in view of that first impression, was the way in which she turned out to be so helpful to him. She sat in a big chair in a small reception room, with Riley opposite, and deliberately, with great care, chose piece after piece of soft-centered chocolate candy from a box on her lap, without offering Riley any. Upstairs the voice of a small child could be heard wailing desolately, but Mrs. Pallen paid no attention to that. She just ate the candy pieces one after another, with the greatest placidity, and between pieces studied with admiring fondness her fine creamy complexion in the wall mirror.

There was no problem of any kind with her. She did give her answers slowly, which might have been a natural mannerism, but she did not evade or hold back at any point; and Riley could see she was not the kind of woman to unduly hurry herself. Oh, yes, she said; of course it was a long time ago, but she never forgot any of the children she was privileged to attend, and she could never, in any case, have forgotten dear little Elizabeth Ann Williams. It was unfortunately true, however, that she was not a wealthy woman. And so in the case of dear little Elizabeth it had been necessary, when her board had not been paid after the grace period of two weeks—

"Well, of course," Riley said. "I can understand how that is," thinking privately and a bit grimly that he would not have cared to trust his old dog Rummy to this sweet, overloving mirror adoration of Mrs. Pallen for Mrs. Pallen. "I suppose then you have to turn them over to a state institution, if you can't find a member of the family to be responsible."

"In most cases, yes," Mrs. Pallen agreed primly. "Very true. But I have always thought of a state institution as a simply dreadful environment for a small child. So cold and impersonal, I always feel. So really—"

Fat-creased, sausage-thick fingers hovered again over the candy box. Upstairs angry footsteps clattered over a wooden floor, a door was slammed, and the wailing changed to broken, muted sobs.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Pallen said, having heard, after all. "The poor little Anderson boy. A bad cold, you know. Feverish all day. But Elizabeth now. Well, there were some people I knew up in Athol,

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Massachusetts. French people—a Mr. and Mrs. Duclos. They fell in love with Elizabeth the first time they ever saw her here and they simply begged me. No children of their own, Mr. Riley, and wanting one so very, very much. Well, I was rather naughty, I'm afraid. I did what my heart prompted me to do. Because, if I can admit what I did in the strictest possible confidence now, just between you and me—"

Riley was not altogether sure he was quite that solemn, but he tried. He crossed a forefinger over his heart, shook his head without words, and even elevated his eyebrows slightly to show how well he understood Mrs. Pallen's position.

The eyes studied him a moment, placid as clear water, unbreakable as cold steel. The candy box, almost empty now, was laid aside reluctantly on the coffee table.

"Well, then"—and another inspection, fond as ever, of Mrs. Pallen by Mrs. Pallen in the wall mirror. "Although in any event"—primly humorous light laugh—"it would only be your story against mine, wouldn't it? I mean if anything ever came out. I mean if you're only some kind of investigator up here to—"

"No, no," Riley assured her. "Nothing like that, Mrs. Pallen. I'm here from New York on legal business. I don't know what it's about myself, but I think there might be some sort of small bequest coming to this Elizabeth Ann Williams—if she's the right girl, of course. That's what I'm here to find out. Are you trying to tell me that you let this Mr. and Mrs. Duclos take her?"

Mrs. Pallen clasped her fat hands in her fat lap and began to rock gently.

"I simply could not turn her over to a state institution, Mr. Riley. I remembered my Bible. 'Treat thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.' There was dear little Elizabeth, such a sweet little thing, and so alone in the world. Here were two people bursting with affection for her, longing to take her into a loving, comfortable home and to raise her with the same care and devotion as if she were their own child. I have never been sorry for the decision I made. The state would never have allowed the adoption. Mrs. Duclos had tried and tried with other children and each time was told that she was beyond the age limit. I won't tell you what I did then, Mr. Riley—but I will repeat that I've never been sorry for it. Only last week dear Elizabeth was back here to thank me with all her heart for the decision I made then. Oh, yes. So you see—"

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Riley made a slight and rather jerky movement of the hand, but then controlled it. Things did not often work out so quickly and happily for him. He rubbed his mouth, hoping to cover his movement in that way.

"Last week?" he said. "Only last week, Mrs. Pallen?"

"I believe last Saturday," Mrs. Pallen said, still rocking away with the greatest serenity. "Oh, yes. She works in a bank down in Hartford now. Mr. Duclos died some years ago, and Mrs. Duclos only last winter. So—"

"Under the name of Elizabeth Ann Williams?"

"Well, no," Mrs. Pallen corrected, inspecting the candy box again but making no selection from it; only hard centers were left. "Under the name of Melanie Duclos—because I think dear Melanie, you see, was her true mother. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I would," Riley lied, thinking again of a long dark street here in this town and of a door that had not been opened and of something that did not seem to fit in at all—of a fat woman who, according to Mr. Beniquez, had almost yanked the guts out of little Elizabeth Ann Williams at every step they took under the tree shadows, as if hating her. "What's the name of her bank?"

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Pallen said, hands clasping together in comical dismay under her three chins. "The Farmers' National, is it—or the Hartford Trust? But wait a moment. I have it somewhere around. I know I have. In my hall desk?"

She waddled herself up, waddled off to the hall desk, where she did not have to look very long, and waddled back. So by the end of his first day on the job Riley had the name and address in his possession. By then, however, it was a bit too late for Hartford, and driving back to his Springfield motel Riley found himself still bothered by one thing—the name and motive of the other fellow mentioned by Mr. Beniquez, who had also been asking questions.

Who else could possibly be interested in Elizabeth Ann Williams, or in Melanie Duclos, and for what reason? An unwanted baby, an unloved child, a little girl abandoned without a thought to the tender mercies of Mrs. Pallen—and now, 32 years later, Riley and a mysterious Mr. X from Xville were both making inquiries about her. Riley understood why he was doing it. He had been hired. But Mr. X?

Nothing came, however. Riley could not even guess at the reason. He went to bed with an odd sense of urgency nagging at him, and woke up very early the next morning still worried by it.

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Yet his instructions had been very specific—to find the girl as quickly as he could but not to approach her at all, and then to report to the Princess Natasha in person.

But after breakfast, just to be sure about everything, he decided on a short visit to Athol, Massachusetts, and there he found that every detail in Mrs. Pallen's story was confirmed. A Pierre and Melanie Duclos, both now deceased, had resided in Athol for many years, which Riley proved out after ten minutes of idly casual conversation with an old Catholic priest whom he approached in the street. Yes, they'd had one child, an adopted child. Yes, a girl. Yes, they had adopted it way back, 30 years or so past. No, the old priest could not say where they had adopted it. They had tried several times to get one through the state, but it had considered them too old even then. No, she had moved away from Athol after old Mrs. Duclos passed on last winter. In Hartford now? He did not know. He could not say. But Armand Duclos, Pierre's surviving brother, might know about that—and half an hour later, in an old farmhouse out on the state road, Armand Duclos settled it beyond question.

The year 1950 Armand remembered—and remembered because little Melanie had come to live with Pierre in the same year that Armand's own Jacqueline had been born. Pierre's wife had always wanted children and had never been blessed; very sad. And she had always been fearfully secretive about how and where she had finally got little Melanie. Somewhere down in Connecticut, because so much Pierre had confided to him. Nothing else, however, because both Pierre and his wife had been so afraid the child might be taken away from them. One heard, however, that such things could be arranged for a certain consideration—and there Armand rubbed his thumb over the first two fingers of his right hand. In the papers one could read about that—black market babies. But Pierre and Melanie had kept their mouths tightly closed, as one would expect them to do. The child had always been known, from the first day, as Melanie Duclos, and never anything else.

"Then it's well known up here?" Riley asked. "You could identify her as Melanie Duclos, if necessary?"

"Of a surety," Armand agreed. "A most quiet girl—and a most religious girl, Mr. Riley. With a fine job now down in Hartford. Twice she has written about that to my Jacqueline. Next week my Jacqueline is to visit with her."

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And so there it was, all rock-solid. An hour or two later in Hartford, Riley even contrived a glimpse of Melanie Duclos herself. It was not necessary to approach her, or to ask questions. There was a metal strip in front of her teller's cage, reading *M. Duclos,* and Riley scrutinized her covertly for a minute or so while pretending to fill out a deposit slip in the bank lobby. She was not quite as slim as Princess Natasha, but then she was younger, of course, and in good health. She was just as dark, and in her physical movements had much of the same concentrated, nervously driving intensity. So the right age, the right history, the right physical resemblance, and therefore, obviously, the right girl.

So Riley drove back to New York consoling himself with the fact that he had been quick enough this time, almost unbelievably quick, although when he sat down at home to a belated dinner and his evening paper, he found out that unfortunately he had not been quick enough. The Princess Natasha Ilyanov had died in her Fifth Avenue penthouse the previous night. There was quite a lead story about her. London and Paris were mentioned, and Peking, China, but not number 349 on a certain street in Springfield, Massachusetts.

But Riley had very little doubt that the story was just as she would have wanted it. After that he had the houseful of kids to control until bedtime, and he did, but when he slipped in for the good-night kiss of his two-year-old he could not help thinking of that long dark street, and of the cold November rain falling.

"I don't know why," he confessed later to his wife Molly, when at last they were alone in their bedroom, "but I've still got a queer feeling about this thing. If that other fellow was after the girl the way I was, why didn't he find out the things I did? It was simple enough. The road was right there in front of him. So why the hell didn't he follow it? He should have got to Mrs. Pallen anyway, even without Beniquez. But according to her he never showed up there. Why? What stopped him along the line?"

"Now don't worry yourself any more tonight," Molly said soothingly. "You're simply worn out, with all the driving you've had to do. That's the answer. Maybe this Beniquez was just telling a story for you, building himself up for a few more dollars."

"Possibly," Riley grunted, staring down at the moving tree shadows on the walk under their window. "But why does the whole thing shape up straight as an arrow, without one missing link to be seen? Just as if—"

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He became motionless on those words, trousers half on, half off. He sank awkwardly on the bed, holding the trousers in the same position, and stared at Molly.

"What's the matter?" she demanded anxiously. "Is it the old lumbago again? Are you not feeling well?"

"The matter is that I'm the world's biggest fool," he said, brushing a hand over his eyes in a slow dazed manner. "The world's own omadhaun, Molly. Where the hell were my brains? Of course! One of them was lying to me. That's the answer!"

And on the Friday of that week, about eleven thirty in the morning, immediately following the Princess Natasha's funeral, the same three people of the other day were in the Fifth Avenue living room when Riley entered. The secretary, all in black, fussed with a handkerchief; the husband managed to look up at Riley, but in a weak and constrained manner; and Mr. La Salle, suitably mournful in expression, went on pouring a drink of Scotch for himself.

"I asked all of you to meet me here because I still have my report to make," Riley began stolidly. "I was instructed to make it only to the lady herself, but since that isn't possible now, I'll make it to you. Well, the report is that it won't go, I'm afraid. An old fellow named Beniquez went and blew the whistle on you, without even suspecting he did. But of course you weren't worried about him. You didn't even know he existed. How could you? Last month up in Springfield your Mr. X from Xville only talked to his helper."

Mr. La Salle replaced the whiskey bottle calmly, deliberately.

"I'd like to know," he murmured, "exactly what you're talking about. "You were ordered to conduct a certain investigation for Madame Ilyanov. Did you?"

But suddenly Miss Cotter began to cry. The husband, also reaching out for the whiskey, had to wipe a shakily foolish grin from his lips.

"Oh, yes," Riley nodded, glancing in turn from one to the other. "Well, now, from the looks I see here, I take it that all three of you were in on it with your heads together for the past couple of weeks like so many thieves. You knew what that poor dead woman had on her mind. You had to know. You were the three people closest to her in the whole world—her husband, her secretary, and one of the directors of her company. You knew she was

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dying, and so did she. What she wanted was to make up for a thing she did thirty years ago that she couldn't forget. But what *you* wanted was to get hold of the money she'd leave—and there would be a hell of a lot of it, of course. She'd been a damned good business woman. Millions and millions."

Mr. La Salle regarded him with cold glittering eyes. The husband drank hurriedly. Miss Cotter whimpered.

"So," Riley went on grimly, "I'd say you tried to get the lie of the land for yourselves through this Mr. X from Xville without telling her a word about it. Only what he found out for you put a far different face on the plan. Mrs. Pallen didn't even remember the child. She couldn't give him an idea in the world of what happened to it after old Eddie Williams wouldn't pay the board bill any more. She finally admitted as much to me yesterday afternoon, when I visited her for the second time and faced her with the term in state's prison she'd get if she didn't own up to the whole story.

"So what to do? It was bad enough to hand over all that money to a damned unknown slip of a girl—but it was even worse to hand it all over to charity, which the will provided for if the daughter couldn't be found. Oh, yes. This morning I was permitted to look over Madame Ilyanov's will downtown in the lawyer's office. And it's all right down there in black and white, signed and witnessed. And of course Miss Cotter would have known about that. She must have typed the thing out. She was left a small pension; the bereaved husband was left enough to keep him going for a while, but just enough; and the rest to charity. Small potatoes, wasn't it? I mean in view of what might have been—or, if the matter could be arranged, might still be.

"Then I suppose one of you came up with a real brilliant idea. If the right child couldn't be found, then why not come up with a reasonable facsimile and cut the swag into five parts—one each for the husband, the secretary, the company director, Mrs. Pallen, and Melanie Duclos? Simple enough, wasn't it? All you needed was a girl of the right age—a girl whom nobody who mattered had seen for over thirty years—a girl with at least something of the same background, and with at least a passing physical resemblance in hair color and eyes to Madame Ilyanov. It didn't have to be too close. Very few children are the physical spits of the parents they have. Just find a girl like that, train her in a few easy-to-see mannerisms that her supposed mother had—and by

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God you'd be home-free! What you did, consequently—"

"I never wanted to," Miss Cotter burst out, now weeping openly. "But when they kept after me and showed me how easy and safe it all would be—"

"Keep quiet," La Salle gritted. "Shut your damned mouth! Then what can they prove?"

"Don't push me," Riley said, with a quiet, very ominous undertone in his voice. "That wouldn't be advisable, sir. At any rate, you stumbled on the one perfect instrument to carry out the plot for you—Victoria Pallen. She'd done a thriving business in that line over the years. More couples than Duclos and his wife had wanted to adopt a child, but for one reason or another were not permitted to, at least legally. So Mrs. Pallen accommodated them the other way—under the table. She's admitted to hunting up Melanie Duclos for you.

"And after that? Get a legitimate detective agency, my agency, to track down Elizabeth Ann Williams for you, and of course once I got to the Pallen woman, which I was certain to do, lead me on every step of the way. Mrs. Duclos never told anybody the right name of her adopted child. She was too afraid the child would be taken away from her.

"That's how you all lined it up. From Springfield to old Eddie Williams, from him to Mrs. Pallen, from Mrs. Pallen to Athol, from Athol to Hartford, and from Hartford to back here. How could you miss? No fingerprints on record; no brothers or sisters; and only a drunken old reprobate of a grandfather long dead.

"Mrs. Pallen would swear herself black in the face that she'd turned over old Eddie's granddaughter to the Duclos family—and from there on, of course, you had a six-lane boulevard. You could find a hundred people in Athol—teaching nuns, Catholic priests, friends, relatives—to identify Melanie Duclos as the same girl. Then, too, the best thing of all was that everyone concerned, and from the highest possible motive, would do whatever they could to keep the thing as quiet as possible. No publicity. A family secret, wasn't it? To protect a poor dead woman's name and reputation. But the way it happened, I couldn't stop thinking about Mr. X from Xville and wonder what he was digging around for. He just didn't fit in. Then I got the notion that either old Beniquez was lying for no reason I could figure out up there in Springfield—or if he wasn't, then Mrs. Pallen was. But I take it now that you don't intend to go on with it?"

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Mr. La Salle, silent for a long moment, put down his glass.

"But what nonsense," he remarked scornfully. "If it's all just as you say, then I think perhaps you should have thrown in with us. You're not very bright, are you? You never thought of that."

"I suppose," Riley said, turning his back to him, "I might have been thinking of something else, sir. A bitter-cold November night with the rain falling and someone who refused to open a door."

"What?" Mr. La Salle said. "I'm afraid I don't quite—"

Riley turned at the door.

"Then I'll put it another way," he said. "Thirty years ago little Elizabeth Ann Williams was the body of a crime for which no one was ever punished—but she won't be again. Good day to you all."

"So you still think you can find her," the husband put in lightly. "Good hunting, Mr. Riley. I wish you luck."

"Got a legal contract," Riley told him, "signed by Madame Ilyanov herself to proceed with the search as long as required. Which means that we can put a lot of men on the job, well trained and experienced men, and I intend to see that we do. Just give us a little time, that's all. We'll find her."

And months later they did, after endless interviews, much checking of records, many false leads, and one really good one. That was when Riley himself checked the confirmation lists of a small-town Protestant church and found listed there one Elizabeth Ann Williams, born in the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, on October 3, 1946. After that it was not difficult at all. She was able to be traced then, under different names, from one foster family to another, and in April of the following year she was found at last, married to an unsuccessful actor and working as a bar girl in a sleazy honkytonk in Los Angeles.

But she was her mother's daughter all right and Riley never doubted it. She proved the thing out. After she was brought back to New York she divorced the actor and reorganized her mother's company so completely that La Salle and three other directors were forced out. Then she married a handsome, wealthy, and socially prominent young man in Newport, Rhode Island, and protested angrily to Riley's agency, even threatening legal action, about the many costs they had incurred during their long search for her. One thing, however, she did not do. She never saw Riley again after Los Angeles, and never, not even through a secretary, sent him so much as a two-line letter of thanks.

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a *NEW* Charlie Dark story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

Continuing the exploits of Charlie Dark, the over-age, overweight counterespionage agent, with an ego even bigger than his body . . . In this adventure Charlie is rushed to Moscow—a top-priority assignment almost in the shadow "of the Kremlin's crenelated onion towers," involving top-secret data and top-sensitive capers . . .

CHARLIE IN MOSCOW

by BRIAN GARFIELD

The plane delivered me to Sheremetevo at eleven Tuesday morning but it was past three by the time the attaché's car brought me to the embassy: the Soviets get their jollies from subjecting known American agents to bureaucratic harassment.

After my interminable session with insulting civil servants and the infuriating immigration apparatus I was dour and irritable and, overriding everything else, hungry.

As we drove in I had a look at the embassy and saw the smudges above the top-story windows where the fire had licked out and charred the stonework. I made a face.

I introduced myself at the desk and there was a flurry of phoning and bootlicking. I was directed to the third floor and managed to persuade one of the secretaries to send down for a portable lunch. Predictably I was kept waiting in Dennis Sneden's outer office and I ate the sandwiches there, after which—20 minutes having passed—I stood up on the pretext of dropping the lunch debris in the blonde receptionist's wastebasket.

When she looked up, startled, I said, "Tell him he's kept me cooling my heels long enough."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I know you all resent my coming. But making me sore won't

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help any of us. Punch up the intercom and tell him I'm coming in." I strode past her desk to the door.

"Sir, you can't—"

"Don't worry, I know the way."

Sneden was on the phone. He looked up at me, no visible break of expression on his pale features, and said into the mouthpiece, "Hang on a minute." He covered it with his palm. "Sit down, Charlie, I'll only be a minute."

The blonde was behind me, possibly trying to decide how to eject me by force. It would have been a neat feat in view of the fact that I outweighed her by two-and-a-half to one. After Sneden had addressed me with civility she changed her mind, made an apologetic gesture of exasperation to Sneden, and withdrew.

He said into the phone, "Nothing we can do until we know more about it. Listen, Charlie Dark's here, he just walked into the office. I'll have to call you back—we should have an update later . . . Right. Catch you." He cradled it and tried to smile at me.

The chair was narrow; I had to perch. Through the high window I had a distant glimpse of the Kremlin's crenelated onion towers.

Sneden looked pasty, his flat puffy face resembling the crust of a pie; I attributed the sickly look to chagrin over what had happened and fear for his job. I said, "I'm not necessarily here to embarrass you."

"No?"

"The Security Executive—Rice—wants a first-hand report. And I'm to lend a hand if it seems desirable."

"Desirable to whom?"

"Me."

"That's what I thought." He lit a cigarette. His fingers didn't tremble visibly. "It was a freak."

"Was it set? Arson?"

"We don't know yet. It's being investigated."

"But there were Russian firemen inside the building."

"Moscow fire department. We had to. But not on the top floor. We handled that ourselves with portable extinguishers. It never got too bad up there—we caught it before it spread that far."

"You know for a fact there's no possibility any of them got up to the top floor, no matter how briefly?"

"No possibility. None. Our people were at the head of the stairs to cordon it."

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"I'll accept that, then."

"Thank you," Dennis said. "I'm in charge of security here. I do my job." But his eyes drifted when he said it; then he sighed. "Most of the time. As you know, there's one point of uncertainty."

"The safe on the third floor."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about it."

"It was all in my report through the bag."

"Go over it again for me."

"Charlie, what's the point? I doubt anybody got into the safe. There's no sign anything's been disturbed. But there's a one-in-a-thousand chance that it happened and we have to be guided by that—we have to assume the safe was compromised."

"Hell of an expensive assumption, Dennis."

"I know. I can't help it."

"Files covering six current covert operations."

"Ongoing operations, right."

"Including the identities of at least eleven of our agents."

"Yes. But everything's in code."

"Never was a cowboy that couldn't be throwed, never was a horse that couldn't be rode. Dennis, there never was a code that couldn't be broke."

"I know. But each operational file is kept in a different code. The Control on each operation has access only to his own codes."

"Who assigns the codes?"

"I do. Part of my job."

"Then nobody else can decipher more than one case-officer's files without access to your code books?"

"Well, they're not code books any more, they're computer programs. But in essence you're correct. Nobody can decode more than a few of those files at a time."

"Unless they manage to break all the codes simultaneously," I said. "If they breached those files with a camera we have to write off six current operations and eleven crucially valuable agents."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Charlie, but only two of them are crucially valuable. The other nine are just nice to have but in the cruel impersonal terms of modern espionage they're expendable." He was fiddling with his windproof cigarette lighter, flicking the lid open and shut. "We've already taken preliminary steps to shut down the capers and cover our tracks."

"Good."

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"The safe was unlocked—before, during, and after the fire. In the excitement it didn't occur to anybody to lock it. I guess that's my fault; it's my job to maintain security."

"Your loyalty to your subordinates is commendable, Dennis, but it doesn't solve the problem."

Dennis tapped ash ferociously from his cigarette, missed the ashtray, and bent down to blow the ashes off the desk. I said, "Did the Comrades or did they not photograph the contents of the safe?"

"There's no way to find out. Not for a while until we start getting feedback from them."

"That could be too late. I'll need to have a look at those files."

I spent most of the night with the files and a brown bagful of cooling hamburgers from the cafeteria downstairs. By the end of it, I realized why Rice had picked me for this one. He hates me—no more than I hate him—and whenever a job comes along that requires both ingenuity and mortal risk he likes to throw it at me because, whatever the outcome, he can't lose. If I come a cropper, then my embarrassment, injury, incarceration, or demise will provide Rice with perverse satisfaction; if I succeed in bringing off the impossible, then the success will reflect on Rice and he will climb higher in the favor of the Langley executives. It's no wonder he keeps me on, even though I'm too fat to pass the physical and considerably past the standard civil-service retirement age.

The files offered me a half a dozen covert capers-in-progress to select from. All of them were espionage operations involving hired Russians who had been subverted by the American station operatives, usually for money, less often by means of blackmail or other shady coercions. None of them was selling his country out for ideological reasons; spies seldom do except in movies.

The eleven agents listed in the coded files from the embassy's safe were unimportant people for the most part: two of them were charwomen with access to certain wastebaskets; others were clerks, countermen, a typist, a telephone repairman, a minor commissar's chauffeur, a computer technician, and a laboratory assistant.

I found possibilities in two of the six operations although the risks in both cases would be high: one misstep and I could find myself in the Lubianka dungeons with electrodes affixed to my

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tender parts. There were several KGB executives who would delight in getting me into such a plight.

Dennis was still nervous. "I could be in bad trouble."

"Take it easy. The worst you'll suffer may be early retirement. You've only got ten months left anyway."

"Just the same—"

"Don't ask me to cover up anything, Dennis. I'm not in the whitewash trade."

"I wouldn't do that. What do you take me for? We've known each other too long for you to say that to me, Charlie." But he said it too fast and I focused my gaze on the summary sheets so that I wouldn't compound his guilt by witnessing it.

He annoyed me, putting his petty career ahead of the job at hand, but it was understandable. A black mark on his service record this late in his career would hurt his chances to get a top job in civilian security; it could make the difference between prestige positions in aerospace corporate counterespionage and routine jobs with the security departments of small banks.

I took out one of the summary sheets. "We'll concentrate on this one. It's our best shot. The MIG-32 designs."

"Why?"

"If they've learned about the leak they'll plug it—start feeding us phony information." I tapped the document and it made the flimsy flashpaper rattle. "You've got two people inside the MIG-32 program feeding us data on aircraft development and weapons systems. If the KGB got a copy of this file from our safe they'll put surveillance on these two agents."

"Maybe not. They may try to fool us by leaving the two alone."

"Any of the other capers, yes. But this one's too sensitive. They can't afford *not* to plug a leak in the MIG-32 program. It's the most advanced fighter-bomber design in the world. If they get it into production within the next few years they'll be a dozen years ahead of us—unless we can build countermeasures around our stolen copies of their designs. With that much at stake they can't play cute games with our intelligence people. If they know these two guys are working for us they'll either double them or transfer them to a less sensitive sector to get them away from access to top-secret data."

"Well, if the two guys get transferred we'll know about it."

"Yeah."

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"But how will we know if they're doubled?"

"Why, we'll ask one of them, Dennis."

I gave it two days because I wanted to be sure the KGB had time to make their move if they were going to make one. Thursday after dark Sneden and I left the embassy in an official limousine and led the Russian shadow-cars around the city a while. Then near the old Ekaterinburg Station we pulled around a corner far enough ahead to be out of their sight just long enough for the two of us to get out of the car and hide in the shadows; then our driver went on toward the British embassy where he would enter the underground garage, wait three hours, then return along the same route to pick us up.

Free of the tail we walked four blocks along poorly lit streets to an unexceptional third-story flat that belonged to a French journalist who was away covering a trade fair in Riga. We'd had the flat swept for bugs that afternoon and in any case I carried a jammer in my briefcase.

Dennis made a drink and left me alone with it; he didn't want Poltov to see his face. Poltov had been recruited by another Control and was run by a cut-out, all standard procedure, and Poltov had no idea who his real boss was. It didn't matter if he saw my face; I'd be out of the country soon anyway; but Dennis had to be protected—he was embassy staff.

Poltov arrived at half-past eleven. He was a neat small fellow with carefully combed gray hair and the conceited self-confidence of a Cockney bookmaker. He had something to do with computers—a fact that made him a great prize to Dennis Sneden's department because it gave Poltov access to every question, answer, and program that went through the computer banks on the MIG-32 project.

He introduced himself and shook my hand; he seemed amused by my corpulence. He made himself a drink without comment. Cognac, I noticed—none of the domestic trash for him. He'd be much more comfortable in sharkskin than in the drab Moscow serge he wore; he had ambitions to be dapper. One day, with the money we were paying him, he'd find his way to Austria or Denmark and set himself up in luxury.

When he had tasted the cognac he smiled at me. He spoke a hard Kharkov Russian that I had a little trouble following. "May I ask who you are?"

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"Call me Tovarich Ivanovitch if you like," I said.

"Your accent is atrociously American."

"I'm not much of a linguist. They gave me the eight-week course at the Army school in Monterey. Sit down, Tovarich, and tell me what unusual things have happened to you in the past forty-eight hours."

"Unusual? Yes, there's been one thing."

"What was it?"

"The summons to this meeting." He smiled again, enjoying his little joke.

"Other than that, nothing out of the ordinary?"

"No."

"No break in routine? No phone calls from strangers? No odd encounters? No questions?"

"Nothing."

"You've had security briefing? You know how to disclose a tail?"

"Yes. I know if I'm being watched. I'm often watched, it's part of the job. They're clumsy idiots, most of them. I was tailed Monday when I left the computer building. Three men, one car. They shadowed me to the GUM store and then to my flat. I went to bed and in the morning they were gone. It was a routine check on my movements—it happens once or twice a week to all of us. May I ask the reason for these questions?"

"What would you say if I told you that some of the information you've been selling us is false?"

"I would say you are misinformed."

"Poltov, if they've doubled you and you're feeding us false information for them, we'll have you terminated with extreme prejudice. You know the term?"

"Yes. I understand you have the responsibility to do that. But only if I have betrayed you. And I haven't."

"You're too calm about it to suit me," I said. "What, no indignation at the unjust accusation?"

Poltov smiled gently. "We're accustomed to such charges here. Indignation is not a useful response. I am well paid for what I sell to you. My Swiss account grows nicely. I've never sold you false information. If I ever do, I shall expect you to terminate me." Beneath the fatalistic surface his smile was bright and ingenuous.

Dennis was cautious. "Why should you believe him?"

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"Partly intuition—he's a game player, he enjoys the danger, but he's not devious enough to play both ends against the middle. If he were crossing us he'd be nervous about it."

"I still don't see how—"

"If they saw the files they know he's working for us. And if they know he's working for us they can't afford knowingly to let him go on releasing accurate data to us. The project's too vital to their security. Either they'll falsify the information he acquires or they'll force him to discontinue delivering it. Either way we'll know it's blown."

He managed a sickly smile. "I hope it turns out he's clean."

"Because if he's clean then your record's clean?"

"Charlie, I'm only human."

"I'm sorry," I said. "The security lapse was there whether or not the Russians managed to take advantage of it."

Brief anger flashed from him but then he slumped behind the desk. "I guess I knew that anyway. Listen, no hard feelings. I know you've been fair." He flicked his windproof lighter open, ignited it, and poked his cigarette into the flame.

The phone buzzed. He picked it up, spoke, and listened; I watched his face change in a violent exhalation of smoke. When he cradled it he looked angry, then crushed. "Damn them! Begorenko committed suicide this morning."

"Begorenko?"

"One of our agents in the GRU. One of the names in the safe. Charlie, I think it must mean they got into the safe."

It called for a council of war. Reinforcements were summoned from the Security Executive—young Leonard Ross flew in from Paris and then we were favored with the presence of Joe Cutter who arrived handsome and alert from Tokyo; finally on Saturday, Rice himself flew in over the Pole from Langley and we had a quorum. In the embassy's conference room the jammers were running and the blinds drawn.

First Sneden reported, bringing it up to date. "We lost another one last night. Rastovic jumped off the roof of a block of flats in Leningrad. Less than forty-eight hours after Begorenko's death. Of course we don't know if they killed themselves or if they were suicided by the Organs, but it means the same thing either way—we're blown. Six operations, eleven operatives. Including the MIG-32 program."

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Ross: "Are we sure of that? It couldn't be coincidence?"

Cutter: "Two dead out of eleven? Not a chance."

Sneden: "I'm afraid Joe's right. I feel miserable about this. It's my fault—I was too lax in my guidelines for third-floor security. The safe should never have been left unlocked."

Cutter: "Why wasn't it locked?"

Sneden: "Ease of access. We had five different Controls in and out of it all the time. Plus myself and occasionally the First Secretary. If we had to unlock the damn thing every time . . ."

Rice: "All right, all right. Let's hear from Mr. Dark."

Me: "A couple of curious items. See what you make of them. Item one—evidence of arson. Traces of lighter fluid residue in the wastebasket where the fire started. Any comments?"

Cutter: "The fire had to be set by somebody inside. It was burning before the Russian firemen arrived. Elementary conclusion: a saboteur among us. Elementary question: to what purpose?"

Me: "Elementary answer: to cover something up and/or provide a distraction. Agreed?"

Rice: "Go on, Charlie."

Me: "Item two. As far as we know, the computer information coming through from agent Poltov is still clean. If not accurate it's at least plausible to our scientists who've been analyzing it as it comes through. As of last night, when I had my third interview with Poltov, he claimed he'd been neither harassed nor approached."

Ross: "How do we know he's not lying about that? How do we know he hasn't been doubled?"

Rice: "Intuition, Charlie?"

Me: "No. Logic. If they knew he was feeding us they'd stop him or falsify the data. They've done neither. Therefore they don't know he's ours."

Cutter: "Fascinating."

Me: "I knew you'd be the first one to see the point, Joe. Your mind's always six steps ahead of everybody else's. Next to me you're the best."

Cutter: "I might put it the other way around, there, Charlie."

Me: "You'd be wrong. Your talent's equal to mine but I still have the edge in experience."

Ross: "Well, maybe they only managed to break the codes that dealt with Begorenko and Rastovic. Isn't that possible? Maybe they're still working on the rest of the codes over at Cryptanalysis

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in the Arbat. Suppose they don't break Poltov's code until next week after we've cleared him? Then what?"

Me: "No. The Russians haven't broken any of our codes at all. They haven't had time. The fire was set Monday. Begorenko died Thursday night late, or if you prefer Friday morning. It takes longer than that to break a top-class code, even with the aid of the best computers. Unless you've got help from somebody on the other side."

Cutter: "The two suicides, Begorenko and Rastovic—let me get absolutely clear on this. They were on different capers? They had nothing to do with each other? They didn't even know of each other's existence? They had separate Controls, separate cut-outs, separate and distinct codes?"

Sneden: "Correct. Total strangers to each other. One in Moscow, one in Leningrad."

Rice: "But they were both blown. And the only thing they had in common was that both their names were in the safe on the third floor."

Ross: "Leaving us no choice. We've got to shut down all the operations. Including Poltov."

Sneden: "Hell no! Charlie's just got through saying Poltov's secure. How can we shut him down? It would be a disaster for us when we're this close to getting the final data on the MIG-32. Nobody wants to close Poltov down. He's the most valuable agent we've got anywhere in the world at this moment in time."

Me: "I agree with Dennis. Poltov's secure. I vote we let him continue running."

Rice: "I don't follow your reasoning at all. How can we let him run? If it's only a matter of time before they break the code on his file too—"

Me: "I told you. They don't have Poltov's file. They don't have *any* files."

Cutter: "Charlie's right."

Rice: "Somebody please tell me what's going on here."

Me: "Dennis, you can tell him or I will."

Cutter: "I think the cat's got Dennis' tongue. I guess you've got the floor to yourself, Charlie."

Me: "All right. Not without regret. The Russians never got near the safe; if they had, Poltov would have been transferred, killed, or doubled by now. Therefore the information on Begorenko and Rastovic was given selectively to the KGB by someone who didn't

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mind betraying inessential information but balked at selling the hard stuff. It had to be someone inside this embassy, of course—someone who set the fire so as to make it look as if the safe had been compromised. That way we wouldn't look for a spy in our own ranks; we'd look for a spy in a Russian fireman's uniform instead. That gets our culprit off the hook, covers his tracks. That's what the distraction was for."

Sneden: "That could have been anybody."

Cutter: "Dennis, you're the only one who had access to both codes—the two governing Begorenko and Rastovic."

Me: "And you use that old-fashioned lighter, Dennis. Most of the other smokers here use matches or butane disposables. They don't own lighter fluid. You do."

Cutter: "How much did they pay you, Dennis?"

Dennis Sneden was ash-white but he held his tongue and refused to meet anyone's eyes. Misery wafted off him like the smell of decay.

I said, "Most of the files are routine information-gathering capers. We buy information whether it's important or not. It all goes into the hopper. Most of it, individually, isn't important to our security. Begorenko sold us statistical data on collective farm output and miscellaneous agricultural information. Rastovic kept us posted on personnel shifts in administrative commissariats in Leningrad. I guess Dennis felt he could sell those without bruising his conscience too badly. He knew his professional future was dim. He wanted a cushion—money for his retirement. A little supplement to the pension. What was it, Dennis? A few hundred thousand in a Swiss bank account?"

He didn't answer.

Cutter said, "But he's still loyal enough to protect the vital mission. He couldn't sell Poltov to them."

I said, "That was his mistake. Dennis, you really should have blown Poltov. We might never have found you out."

Sneden said quietly, "What do you take me for?"

None of us needed to answer that. After a moment Sneden crushed out his cigarette. "Do I get killed or what?"

Rice smiled at me. "Charlie broke the case—we'll leave the disposition to him." He got up and wandered out of the room, having lost interest in the proceedings. Damn him! He wanted to force me to order an execution—he knows I don't kill people. He thinks

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it's because I'm squeamish—it doesn't occur to him that it might be a matter of moral scruple.

I looked at Joe Cutter and Leonard Ross. Neither of them was at all amused. Cutter said, "He's a class-A wonder, Rice is."

Ross, who is young and collegiate and manages to retain a flavor of naivete despite several years in the service, brooded at Dennis. "Why the hell did you do it?"

Dennis sat listlessly, with smoke trickling from his nostrils. He stared bleakly at the tabletop; he neither stirred nor responded to Ross's question.

I said, "I don't see any need for blood. Dennis, are you ready to sign a confession?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Joe Cutter said, "You could commit suicide."

"Not me."

"Then you haven't got a choice."

"What if I deny the charges?"

I only stared him down and he understood. If he didn't cooperate he'd be terminated—if not by me then by somebody else working under Rice's instructions.

"If I sign a confession what happens then?"

I said, "You go to prison. It's the best we can do. We can't have you getting bitter and selling the rest of your inside knowledge to the Comrades. In a few years you'll get out on parole—after the information in your head has become obsolete."

Cutter said, "Take the deal, Dennis. It's a better offer than you'd get anywhere else."

Dennis took the deal.

I drove out to the airport with Joe Cutter. When we queued for our flight he said, "One of these days Rice is going to force you to kill somebody, or get killed yourself."

"He keeps trying to," I agreed. "He's perverse."

"Why don't you get out, then? God knows you're old enough to quit."

"And do what?"

I walked away toward the plane.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF THIRD STORIES

The letter reached Edward Clark at the ebb of his finances and the flood tide of his troubles; so it proved irresistible. And besides, the plan proposed by "the complete stranger" was foolproof . . .

THE EYES OF THE OKAPI

by MICHAEL TALBOT

All Edward Clark could think of were the eyes of the okapi, piercing and lifeless. They were haunting eyes, those dark glass orbs. How they must have watched in the uneasy silence of the hunt. For a moment he fancied he could hear a tattoo of hoofs on the scorched African veldt, and then the report of the gun that froze those eyes in their icy stare.

He crouched beneath the protective boughs of a large pine and cautiously surveyed the house. There was no sign of movement. The driveway that curled up to the large four-car garage, the vast lawn, the ghostly white portico with supporting Doric columns—all were stark and silent in the moonlight. Nonetheless, he was more than a little nervous. With growing anxiety he examined every looming shadow in the shrubbery and furtively searched the great stone wall that surrounded the estate. Behind him he saw the stretch of open lawn that he still must cover to reach the large Spanish wrought-iron gate. It was too far, he thought, and once again he remembered the eyes of the okapi.

It was greed that had got him into this. Beneath his knee a twig snapped and he froze for a moment in terror. But wasn't it greed that usually inspired this sort of thing? The plan had seemed so perfect, he should have suspected something would go wrong. His thoughts raced back to the letter he had received only a week before . . .

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Alexis purred demurely and wound around his leg. "Hush, pet," Edward murmured and stroked the feline's serpentine tail. He sorted through the morning's mail and discarded the usual collection of bills. Everybody from book clubs to banks was after Edward Clark. It wasn't that he meant to be so irresponsible, but in his 32 years he had declared bankruptcy twice and had changed identity no less than three times. The fact that he had just received the final notice before the repossession of his car made it look as if he would have to take drastic measures once again.

Then he came to the letter that was to change everything.

Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. The most he had ever received in the mail was his weekly unemployment check, and when he opened the plain manila envelope to find a clutch of $1000 bills staring at him, he blanched in surprise and half fainted. Nearly elated, yet not sure the money was real, he withdrew the bills quickly only to find each of them cut neatly in half.

He checked the front of the envelope.

It bore his name and address, but there was no return address. Nor was there any on the back. Lifting the flap again he discovered, folded so perfectly it fit almost unnoticed, a single sheet of paper. He withdrew it hastily and tore it open. The letter was intended for him since his name was repeated on the inside. But before he could bring himself to read it, he returned to the stack of money, examining each half bill, scrutinizing the details of the printing. He even tried to piece the bills together in pairs hoping to find a match, but quickly discovered they were all left-hand halves. At last he turned his attention to the letter. It read:

My dear Mr. Clark:

Enclosed you will find the left half of ten $1000 bills. These in themselves are worthless. If you would be interested in acquiring the other halves I have a proposition to offer you. In a word, murder.

Let me first state that you do not know me, we have never met, and for obvious reasons I must remain anonymous. I have a person I wish dead. I chose you because after a little investigation I have discovered that you are a stranger in great need of money and I am a stranger in need of a large favor. Consequently, I am enticing you with the useless half of $10,000.

I have planned the murder in detail; the intended victim is also a complete stranger to you. If you should decide to accept my

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business offer I will provide you with the plan of the murder, the name of the intended victim, and the right halves of two of the $1000 bills as a token of my good faith. On completion of the murder I will give you the remaining eight halves which, I might point out, are as useless to me as your halves are to you.

I have arranged the details so cleverly that this plan is foolproof if executed properly. You will have no worries of ever getting caught because nothing will lead to you. For all practical purposes you have no motive. The victim is an absolute stranger to you and there is nothing to tie you to me.

I have been careful to leave no fingerprints on either this letter, the money, or the envelope. I have typed it on a coin-operated typewriter in the public library so that nothing can be traced to me. If you refuse my proposition the police will have virtually nothing to go on—I am safe. If you accept my proposition the police will also have nothing to go on—you will remain safe.

If you accept my offer I would advise you to destroy this letter since it is the only thing that connects you to the crime. Put the ten halves anywhere you like as long as there is no possibility of arousing suspicion. Then place a piece of red construction paper in the back window of your car and sometime during the coming week I will see it there and continue correspondence. The sincerity of my offer is overt in the fact that I am gambling with these ten halves. I hope that my business proposition meets with your full approval.

Sincerely,
a complete stranger

Edward stared at the pile of currency as he contemplated the ramifications of the offer. It all seemed so perfect. Yet he was filled with the vaguest sense of unease and hesitancy. It wasn't that he didn't take the anonymous letter writer seriously. The writer had obviously been serious enough to sacrifice ten perfectly good $1000 bills. Nor was it that he felt diffident about murder—or at least some murders.

He drummed his fingers contemplatively on the table. After all, wasn't it less of a crime to kill someone who had done something wrong than it was to kill a child? Definitely some murders seemed more justifiable than others. With smug self-righteousness he decided that he simply could not commit himself to such a deed unless he knew more about the person he was killing and why it was necessary for that person to be killed.

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The next day he put a large piece of red construction paper in the back window of his car with a chalked message scrawled across it: *Who and why? I must know more.* A few days later the reply came in the mail.

My dear Mr. Clark:

The person whom I wish you to murder is a very rich and selfish old man. Until I know the seriousness of your part in this venture all I can tell you about him is that he has lived a long and adventurous life and is now an invalid confined to his bedroom. I wish him dead for two reasons. First, because he is in much pain and will die soon anyway, and secondly, because I (as well as numerous other members of his family and numerous business associates) stand to benefit financially.

And now, my dear Mr. Clark, I can tell you no more until you inform me of your decision. If you accept my offer, please keep the sheet of red construction paper in your back window. If you refuse it, take the sheet out. As with my first communication, it is imperative that you destroy this letter. I bid you adieu.

Sincerely,
the stranger

The sheet remained and two days later a package arrived in the mail. Greedily Edward opened the parcel as Alexis sniffed at the edge of the table. "Down," he snapped. As he made a move to strike her she darted away. The first thing he noticed were the two halves of $1000 bills. "G23768720B," he whispered to himself as he found its match and sighed in relief. So at least his unknown accomplice was serious in the initial payment of $2000.

Edward stuffed the banknotes into his shirt pocket as he opened the second object in the parcel. It was a .32 caliber revolver, small enough to be contained unobtrusively under his jacket, and carefully taped to its barrel was a single bullet. He read the enclosed note:

My dear Edward:

As you can see, I have sent you the first payment stipulated in the terms of our agreement. Also included is the murder weapon along with a single bullet. I am only sending you one bullet because, as I told you, the victim is an invalid and will offer no resistance. As you might also suspect I have taken great pains to make sure that there is nothing to connect me with the murder weapon. The only information you need now is the murder plan and, of course, the name of the victim.

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Ernest Dickerson.

I suggest for your own safety that you neither investigate Mr. Dickerson nor even mention his name to anyone. There must be nothing to indicate that you and he are anything but complete strangers. The murder itself must be committed this coming Sunday evening between the hours of eight and ten o'clock. I have seen to it that the house will be completely empty except for Mr. Dickerson and you will find the front door unlocked. I also suggest that you park your car outside the front gate so that Mr. Dickerson will not hear you coming. As for the old man, you will find him helpless in his bedroom on the second floor, at the north end of the house.

I consider our agreement binding, so I feel obliged to warn you, should you for any reason either betray me or fail to carry out your part, it would be a simple matter to substitute your name for Mr. Dickerson's and make this same offer to someone else. I trust you to keep this from ever happening. Remember, my halves of the remaining eight bills are completely worthless to me and there would be no reason for me to not give them to you after you have succeeded in your task. For our mutual safety I must ask you once again to destroy this letter after you have memorized the pertinent details. I wish you much luck.

Cordially,
your silent partner

Edward straightened with a start after he had finished the letter. The notion that his unknown benefactor might perfunctorily make him the object of such a plot was alarming. In its abstract form murder was nothing. In the form of a real threat to himself he began to feel a revulsion to the whole project. But he was committed now and besides, he had nothing to worry about. He desperately needed the remaining $8000 and had every intention of going through with the murder.

When he arrived at the estate he parked his car as directed and made his way toward the house. At first the size of the place overwhelmed him and he became worried that there must be servants or perhaps even guards. But the letter had stated distinctly that the house would be empty and one lone light streaming through a stained-glass window on the second floor seemed to indicate his fears were unfounded. Edward tried the door. It opened quietly.

Once inside he made his way quickly to the second floor. The

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faint flicker of a fireplace seen through an open door at the end of the hall caused him to pause. This must be it, he thought, yet he hesitated just on the verge of realizing his dream of a small fortune. Inside was a person he had never seen before and who had no idea Edward even existed. It was not as easy as he had expected it to be—the same feeling of revulsion began to gnaw at him. He tried to remain calm, but still waited many more minutes before stepping forward stealthily.

When he got close enough he could see that the room was spacious. The floor was carpeted in a lush scarlet, and heavy walnut furniture shimmered golden in the dim light. A single foot loomed disproportionately large and was a disturbing element in the luxurious surroundings. As he made his way into the room he saw the silhouette of a sleeping man in a wheelchair before the fire. The man sat with his back turned slightly toward the door and Edward couldn't make out his features. He was large in frame, but his hair was white. Huge stubby fingers gripped the arms of the wheelchair like the claws of a gargoyle perched on the cornice of an ancient church.

Over the fireplace was the head of an okapi.

With trembling hands Edward leveled the gun at the old man's head and pulled the trigger. The room resounded with the quick firecracker-bang of a gun. For a moment he was too frightened to see anything or think about what he was doing. In the next few confused seconds Edward slowly began to realize that the old man had neither slumped over nor even awakened from the report of the gun.

Then Edward heard the chuckling.

It was a low guttural laugh and when the old man stood up miraculously from the wheelchair, Edward felt the adrenalin surge through his veins. "How—?" he barely breathed, but his voice stopped short when he saw the gun in the old man's hands.

"This is my favorite part," the old man said, smiling.

Clark fell backward, faltered, then caught himself. He ran into the hall and down the stairs. A shot rang out, and another grazed his leg. Somehow he managed to make it out into the vast lawn and hid beneath the boughs of the pine . . .

Now all Edward Clark could think of were the eyes of the okapi. The evening air grew heavy with the sound of night birds and katydids. Somewhere out there he knew the old man was

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watching. He could almost smell him. The gate was perhaps 50 yards away and a moonlit clearing still separated Edward from freedom. He was too terrified to move, but at the same time he felt naked, felt the old man's eyes upon him. Then there was a terrible silence.

Edward bolted across the clearing toward the old Spanish gate. With all his strength he ran and he felt every bone of his body being jarred as his feet pounded the ground.

The cool hiss of a gunshot disturbed the silence.

His body thudded heavily against the damp earth. The old man rushed out and carefully examined him. He dropped his gun and dragged Edward's lifeless form behind the house where he could dispose of it the next morning.

Hours later the old man sat cleaning his gun in front of the fire and then he pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket. The name written on it was Robert Abercrombie, with an address. He chuckled as he got up and inserted a sheet of paper into his typewriter. *My dear Mr. Abercrombie,* he began. *Enclosed you will find the right half of ten $1000 bills. These in themselves are worthless. If you would be interested in acquiring the other halves I have a proposition to offer you. In a word, murder.*

He chuckled once again as he continued to type.

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by JOHN STORM ROBERTS

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HIP TO THE TRIP

by JOHN STORM ROBERTS

I was mad when I opened the door, and I didn't cool out any when I saw who was hitting on it. I'd been at the piano till four A.M., writing arrangements for a gig Saturday night, and I didn't need cops for breakfast. Least of all Cleanhead. I don't mind feuding with him over breakfast at Rosie's diner once in a while, but tight we ain't.

"Well, hey Red," he says, "What's happenin' bro'?"

I looked past him at the rest of the gathering. Cleanhead's sidekick Zits was there, of course, patriotic as ever with his red

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pimples, white face, and blue uniform jacket. The others were my fellow-tenants, which ain't saying much.

I picked Cleanhead's wrist up and looked at his watch. 9:30. *Oy caramba*!

"Peace, brother!" I said. "What brings your fine brown frame here in the middle of the night? Some cat ripped off your squad car?"

Not brilliant, but the best I could do on four hours' sleep.

"Let's rap." Cleanhead drifted into my room. Since I was standing in front of him, I did the same thing backward. Zits followed us, shut the door with his heel, and pushed at his greasy blond hair.

"Okay, Red," says Cleanhead. "Don't be wasting my time with no Richard Pryor act. You a brother, you help a brother, right?" Wrong, Cleanhead, wrong. Hip cops give me a pain, be they ever so Black. Especially stupid hip cops that are also conceited.

Cleanhead looked the place over with an expression like he mebbe had to be in dumps but he didn't have to pretend he liked them, and began to wander around picking things up and putting them down again. Ace interrogator being subtle.

"Where was you last night around two o'clock?"

"Right there." I pointed to the mess of scorepaper on the piano.

"God help the neighbors! Seen the white guitar picker down the hallway lately?"

"Duane? Sure. Why?"

"When?"

"Say nine last night. Why?"

"And?"

The man had me confused. "And why? I mean, and what?"

"Right. And what?"

Zits grinned at me over Cleanhead's shoulder. It must be cool to carry your audience around with you.

"He came hitting on the door because he was having problems with his new tape-deck, and he knew I have the same type machine. So I went over and fixed it."

"How come you could do what he couldn't?"

"You never had problems with something you just bought?"

"I have problems, I take 'em to the store, not to the jive pianist next door. What was his rush?"

I was getting riled. I didn't have to take all this heavy breathing.

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"Go ask him!"

"Don't mess with me, Salter! You never heard of corroboration?"

From Cleanhead that was rich. Still, there's just so far you can push a cop.

"He'd got himself a new demo tape. So he was excited. So I fixed his machine. So you going to make a federal case out of it? You been watching too much TV! What's going down here?"

Cleanhead gave me his double-whammy look, mean and conceited both.

"Somebody bust your honky friend's skull wide-open just after two last night. And you short an alibi, bro', so don't be getting sassy! Just stay here and keep your nose clean."

I stared at the door they'd closed behind them, and felt bad. Duane was dumb, and no more talented than any other would-be rock star running around Greenwich Village on daddy's money. But he didn't have any business with his head busted open. Then I thought of Stacey, Duane's old lady, probably waiting in the kid's room.

I didn't like Stacey; she came on like iceberg lettuce, but underneath the organic patchwork karma, she was greasy greens—always money-grabbing. The only reason she hung around Duane was for board and lodging, which would've been okay if she'd been upfront about it, but she'd also suckered him starry-eyed. Besides, she was a nuisance: she kept making passes at me when Duane was out trying to make it and when I had work to do.

Still and all, I didn't see letting Cleanhead and Zits play Supercop with her. So I got up off my bed and moved down the hall.

The kid's room was a mess. Which would be standard for a cold-water walkup, except that Duane's Mom taught him better, and unlike a lot of kids he stayed taught. Being Stacey was heavy into Bohemian squalor, he did it himself; I never heard him complain.

He wasn't complaining now. He was lying face down on the thrift-shop rug, his legs mixed up in the chair he'd taken down with him. Somebody'd been through the place good. The kid wasn't long on possessions, but what he did have was scattered all about. Stacey was just standing there, waiting.

"Break-in, eh? They get his bread?"

Cleanhead turned around and sneered at me.

"Curiosity killed the cat, hunh?"

I looked down at the body. Not cute. There was a desk mi-

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crophone stand lying alongside him with a few bits of bloody hair and gunge sticking onto the heavy base.

It looked like Duane had been half-standing up, as if he'd been reaching for something on the shelf over the desk. He'd gone over sideways and taken a lot of junk with him. His new tape-deck was still sitting on the table with everything set to go, but he'd got mixed up in the cord, which was hooked into a multiple adaptor along with a whole row of other gadgets.

The adaptor had come out of the wall socket in time to save the tape-deck but not his clock-radio. That had hit the edge of the desk and bounced. The clock still said 2:15.

There was a legal pad on the floor, along with everything else. A list of goofs and suchlike, each with its reference to the deck's tape-counter. The last entry said, "448—correct change???"

Even aside from Duane, who took up a sizable piece of floor, the place was kind of crowded. Cleanhead and Zits were everywhere, Stacey was sitting on the bed, and Eljay was hunched in one corner of the sofa like a rabbit at a greyhound convention.

"Hi El," I said to him. He paid me no mind.

"You know the guy?"

"Don't be stupid, Cleanhead." Everybody on the block knew Eljay, a pathetic little cat who dealt in poor-grade grass and a little light acid. Got his name one night when some head began shouting, "That was one lousy joint," up and down the halls after him. Lousy Joint my man became—L.J. for short.

I went over to the tape-deck. Duane's precious demo tape was still threaded, about one-third played. The counter said 490.

"Guess he must have played this a hundred times."

Cleanhead didn't want music chat.

"Once right through, part of a second time. The old bag downstairs was bitchin' about it. Didn't even take a break in between, she said."

I looked at Stacey. "How'd it sound?"

She stared back at me pathetic.

"I only heard five minutes, Red. I had to leave for The Midnight Mushroom at eleven. I found him when I got back at seven."

"Yeah?" The Midnight Mushroom was an all-night health-food spoon where Stacey earned a buck or two when she could spare the time. "I'd have thought he'd want you to hear it."

Cleanhead looked bored.

"Stick to the flatted whatevers, Salter. I called the joint al-

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ready. From one to three she was hustling spinach salad nonstop."

"Unh-hunh?" I ambled over to the couch. "Eljay, you look like you bought grass and got sold hay."

My man jumped like three feet sitting.

"Hey, tell 'em, Red, man . . . I wouldn't kill nobody, you know? I never made it down here. I was sleeping!"

"C'mon, Eljay, you're just a witness, man!"

"Wrong." Cleanhead, grinning like eight.

I thought he was kidding. The fuzz got a suspect, it's all heavy silences—at least till the press arrives. But no. Cleanhead was the New Cop, hip to the trip with a big flapping lip. "Kid had a date with Eljay for two A.M. Kid also had bread on the premises. Till this morning early, anyway. Not so much as when he left Nowhere, Tennessee, but enough for a hungry pusher. Two thousand long green. You did say two, honey?"

"A little more." Stacey sighed.

Two hundred would be enough for Eljay. Four figures I doubt he could even count to. Maybe Cleanhead had a point, though I wasn't about to tell him so. He was cocky enough already.

Cleanhead was getting restive.

"Okay, Salter, pipe down, willya? I got work to do."

I sat down next to Eljay and smiled a big smile.

"Seconded yourself to Homicide, eh?"

The skin on Cleanhead's neck darkened. He has a hard time remembering he doesn't run the police force single-handed.

Things got quiet in there for a while. I sat back and thought interesting thoughts while Stacey looked bereaved and Eljay snuffled and Cleanhead made like busy and Zits stood and breathed through his mouth.

Homicide showed pretty soon. A couple of gray souls—gray hair, gray suits, gray faces. Cleanhead looked 'em over and grinned. This was going to be his finest hour.

"McNally, Homicide," one of the gray dudes said. "This is Detective Alvarez."

"Well, hey!" says Cleanhead. "Glad you could make it!"

Even Zits didn't snigger at that. McNally smiled, though, and I gave him a second glance. Anybody who could look like he enjoyed Cleanhead was either a bum or a gentleman, and McNally didn't look like a bum.

"Okay, Alvarez," says McNally, and his amigo opened up his little case and began doing his thing.

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"Not getting in the way of routine, but we have your suspect right here!" Cleanhead grinned three times round his head and pointed to Eljay, who looked like he was trying to wish himself into invisibility.

McNally looked at Cleanhead polite. "You wanna tell me?"

Cleanhead wanted to tell McNally like he wanted a million in the bank, and he played it for all it was worth. He had Eljay sentenced, appeal dismissed, and serving life to forever.

"I figured at first it was the fox," he finished up. "But the clock-radio smashed at two-fifteen when the kid went over. That means half of The Midnight Mushroom puts her in the clear."

By now McNally wasn't looking polite, he was looking interested. It was time somebody short-circuited Cleanhead. I got up and ambled over to the tape-deck.

"Know much about these gizmos, detective?"

"My kid has a cassette machine."

"This one does a lot of things your kid's cassette won't. Things you need if going into a studio. Like accurate timing."

By this time steam was coming off of Cleanhead.

"You want me to throw this bum out?" he asked, all enthusiasm.

"Not just yet." McNally glanced down at the machine, then back at me. "You have something definite in mind?"

"Definite enough. The kid started the tape around five minutes before Stacey left for work, right? And this little dial stopped running at 490, when he pulled the plug on his way down, okay?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So if you wind the tape back, run it through once, wind back again, then let it play till 490, you can figure out the exact time that happened. With standard tape on a twelve-inch spool at seven and one-half inches per second, I'd guess around an hour and twenty minutes after he switched on.

"Anybody knows to alter a clock. But who'd think about altering the tape, in all the excitement? You might like to check whether Stacey took a break from work just after midnight."

I turned to her.

"You blew it, honey. All you had to do was flip the off-switch. Nobody'd ever have known."

She looked numb for a moment. Then she spat at me. Like I said, greasy greens is her bag.

I don't know who was madder, Stacey or Cleanhead.

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THIS IS DEATH

by DONALD E. WESTLAKE

It's hard not to believe in ghosts when you are one. I hanged myself in a fit of truculence—stronger than pique, but not so dignified as despair—and regretted it before the thing was well begun. The instant I kicked the chair away I wanted it back, but gravity was turning my former wish to its present command; the chair would not right itself from where it lay on the floor, and my 193 pounds would not cease to urge downward from the rope thick around my neck.

There was pain, of course, quite horrible pain centered in my throat, but the most astounding thing was the way my cheeks seemed to swell. I could barely see over their round red hills, my eyes staring in agony at the door, *willing* someone to come in and rescue me, though I knew there was no one in the house, and in any event the door was carefully locked. My kicking legs caused me to twist and turn, so that sometimes I faced the door and sometimes the window, and my shivering hands struggled with the rope so deep in my flesh I could barely find it and most certainly could not pull it loose.

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I was frantic and terrified, yet at the same time my brain possessed a cold corner of aloof observation. I seemed now to be everywhere in the room at once, within my writhing body but also without, seeing my frenzied spasms, the thick rope, the heavy beam, the mismatched pair of lit bedside lamps throwing my convulsive double shadow on the walls, the closed locked door, the white-curtained window with its shade drawn all the way down. *This is death,* I thought, and I no longer wanted it, now that the choice was gone forever.

My name is—was—Edward Thornburn, and my dates are 1938-1977. I killed myself just a month before my fortieth birthday, though I don't believe the well-known pangs of that milestone had much if anything to do with my action. I blame it all (as I blamed most of the errors and failures of my life) on my sterility. Had I been able to father children my marriage would have remained strong, Emily would not have been unfaithful to me, and I would not have taken my own life in a final fit of truculence.

The setting was the guestroom in our house in Barnstaple, Connecticut, and the time was just after seven p.m.; deep twilight, at this time of year. I had come home from the office—I was a realtor, a fairly lucrative occupation in Connecticut, though my income had been falling off recently—shortly before six, to find the note on the kitchen table: "Antiquing with Greg. Afraid you'll have to make your own dinner. Sorry. Love, Emily."

Greg was the one; Emily's lover. He owned an antique shop out on the main road toward New York, and Emily filled a part of her days as his ill-paid assistant. I knew what they did together in the back of the shop on those long midweek afternoons when there were no tourists, no antique collectors to disturb them. I knew, and I'd known for more than three years, but I had never decided how to deal with my knowledge. The fact was, I blamed myself, and therefore I had no way to *behave* if the ugly subject were ever to come into the open.

So I remained silent, but not content. I was discontent, unhappy, angry, resentful—truculent.

I'd tried to kill myself before. At first with the car, by steering it into an oncoming truck (I swerved at the last second, amid howling horns) and by driving it off a cliff into the Connecticut River (I slammed on the brakes at the very brink, and sat covered in perspiration for half an hour before backing away) and finally

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by stopping athwart one of the few level crossings left in this neighborhood. But no train came for 20 minutes, and my truculence wore off, and I drove home.

Later I tried to slit my wrists, but found it impossible to push sharp metal into my own skin. Impossible. The vision of my naked wrist and that shining steel so close together washed my truculence completely out of my mind. Until the next time.

With the rope; and then I succeeded. Oh, totally, oh, fully I succeeded. My legs kicked at air, my fingernails clawed at my throat, my bulging eyes stared out over my swollen purple cheeks, my tongue thickened and grew bulbous in my mouth, my body jigged and jangled like a toy at the end of a string, and the pain was excruciating, horrible, not to be endured. I can't endure it, I thought, it can't be endured. Much worse than knife slashings was the knotted strangled pain in my throat, and my head ballooned with pain, pressure outward, my face turning black, my eyes no longer human, the pressure in my head building and building as though I would explode. Endless horrible pain, not to be endured, but going on and on.

My legs kicked more feebly. My arms sagged, my hands dropped to my sides, my fingers twitched uselessly against my sopping trouser legs, my head hung at an angle from the rope, I turned more slowly in the air, like a broken windchime on a breezeless day. The pains lessened, in my throat and head, but never entirely stopped.

And now I saw that my distended eyes had become lusterless, gray. The moisture had dried on the eyeballs, they were as dead as stones. And yet I could see them, my own eyes, and when I widened my vision I could see my entire body, turning, hanging, no longer twitching, and with horror I realized I was dead.

But *present*. Dead, but still present, with the scraping ache still in my throat and the bulging pressure still in my head. Present, but no longer in that used-up clay, that hanging meat; I was suffused through the room, like indirect lighting, everywhere present but without a source. What happens now? I wondered, dulled by fear and strangeness and the continuing pains, and I waited, like a hovering mist, for whatever would happen next.

But nothing happened. I waited; the body became utterly still; the double shadow on the wall showed no vibration; the bedside lamps continued to burn; the door remained shut and the window shade drawn; and nothing happened.

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What *now*? I craved to scream the question aloud, but I could not. My throat ached, but I had no throat. My mouth burned, but I had no mouth. Every final strain and struggle of my body remained imprinted in my mind, but I had no body and no brain and no *self,* no substance. No power to speak, no power to move myself, no power to *re*move myself from this room and this suspended corpse. I could only wait here, and wonder, and go on waiting.

There was a digital clock on the dresser opposite the bed, and when it first occurred to me to look at it the numbers were 7:21—perhaps twenty minutes after I'd kicked the chair away, perhaps fifteen minutes since I'd died. Shouldn't something happen, shouldn't some *change* take place?

The clock read 9:11 when I heard Emily's Volkswagen drive around to the back of the house. I had left no note, having nothing I wanted to say to anyone and in any event believing my own dead body would be eloquent enough, but I hadn't thought I would be *present* when Emily found me. I was justified in my action, however much I now regretted having taken it, I was justified, I knew I was justified, but I didn't want to see her face when she came through that door. She had wronged me, she was the cause of it, she would have to know that as well as I, but I didn't want to see her face.

The pains increased, in what had been my throat, in what had been my head. I heard the back door slam, far away downstairs, and I stirred like air currents in the room, but I didn't leave. I couldn't leave.

"Ed? Ed? It's me, hon!"

I know it's you. I must go away now, I can't stay here, I must go away. Is there a God? Is this my soul, this hovering presence? *Hell* would be better than this, take me away to Hell or wherever I'm to go, don't leave me here!

She came up the stairs, calling again, walking past the closed guestroom door. I heard her go into our bedroom, heard her call my name, heard the beginnings of apprehension in her voice. She went by again, out there in the hall, went downstairs, became quiet.

What was she doing? Searching for a note perhaps, some message from me. Looking out the window, seeing again my Chevrolet, knowing I must be home. Moving through the rooms of this old house, the original structure a barn nearly 200 years old, con-

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verted by some previous owner just after the Second World War, bought by me twelve years ago, furnished by Emily—and Greg—from their interminable, damnable, awful antiques. Shaker furniture, Colonial furniture, hooked rugs and quilts, the old yellow pine tables, the faint sense always of being in some slightly shabby minor museum, this house that I had bought but never loved. I'd bought it for Emily, I did everything for Emily, because I knew I could never do the one thing for Emily that mattered. I could never give her a child.

She was good about it, of course. Emily *is* good, I never blamed her, never completely blamed *her* instead of myself. In the early days of our marriage she made a few wistful references, but I suppose she saw the effect they had on me, and for a long time she has said nothing. But I have known.

The beam from which I had hanged myself was a part of the original building, a thick hand-hewed length of aged timber eleven inches square, chevroned with the marks of the hatchet that had shaped it. A strong beam, it would support my weight forever. It would support my weight until I was found and cut down. Until I was found.

The clock read 9:23 and Emily had been in the house twelve minutes when she came upstairs again, her steps quick and light on the old wood, approaching, pausing, stopping. "Ed?"

The doorknob turned.

The door was locked, of course, with the key on the inside. She'd have to break it down, have to call someone else to break it down, perhaps she wouldn't be the one to find me after all. Hope rose in me, and the pains receded.

"Ed? Are you in there?" She knocked at the door, rattled the knob, called my name several times more, then abruptly turned and ran away downstairs again, and after a moment I heard her voice, murmuring and unclear. She had called someone, on the phone.

Greg, I thought, and the throat-rasp filled me, and I wanted this to be the end. I wanted to be taken away, dead body and living soul, taken away. I wanted everything to be finished.

She stayed downstairs, waiting for him, and I stayed upstairs, waiting for them both. Perhaps she already knew what she'd find up here, and that's why she waited below.

I didn't mind about Greg, about being present when he came in. I didn't mind about *him.* It was Emily I minded.

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The clock read 9:44 when I heard tires on the gravel at the side of the house. He entered, I heard them talking down there, the deeper male voice slow and reassuring, the lighter female voice quick and frightened, and then they came up together, neither speaking. The doorknob turned, jiggled, rattled, and Greg's voice called, "Ed?"

After a little silence Emily said, "He wouldn't— He wouldn't *do* anything, would he?"

"Do anything?" Greg sounded almost annoyed at the question. "What do you mean, do anything?"

"He's been so depressed, he's— Ed!" And forcibly the door was rattled, the door was shaken in its frame.

"Emily, don't. Take it easy."

"I shouldn't have called you," she said. "Ed, *please*!"

"Why not? For heaven's sake, Emily—"

"Ed, *please* come out, don't scare me like this!"

"Why *shouldn't* you call me, Emily?"

"Ed isn't stupid, Greg. He's—"

There was then a brief silence, pregnant with the hint of murmuring. They thought me still alive in here, they didn't want me to hear Emily say, "He *knows*, Greg, he knows about us."

The murmurings sifted and shifted, and then Greg spoke loudly, "That's ridiculous. Ed? Come out, Ed, let's talk this over." And the doorknob rattled and clattered, and he sounded annoyed when he said, "We must get in, that's all. Is there another key?"

"I think all the locks up here are the same. Just a minute."

They were. A simple skeleton key would open any interior door in the house. I waited, listening, knowing Emily had gone off to find another key, knowing they would soon come in together, and I felt such terror and revulsion for Emily's entrance that I could feel myself shimmer in the room, like a reflection in a warped mirror. Oh, can I at least stop seeing? In life I had eyes, but also eyelids, I could shut out the intolerable, but now I was only a presence, a total presence, I *could not* stop my awareness.

The rasp of key in lock was like rough metal edges in my throat; my memory of a throat. The pain flared in me, and through it I heard Emily asking what was wrong, and Greg answering, "The key's in it, on the other side."

"Oh, dear God! Oh, Greg, what has he done?"

"We'll have to take the door off its hinges," he told her. "Call Tony. Tell him to bring the toolbox."

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"Can't you push the key through?"

Of course he could, but he said, quite determinedly, "Go *on*, Emily," and I realized then he had no intention of taking the door down. He simply wanted her away when the door was first opened. Oh, very good, *very* good!

"All right," she said doubtfully, and I heard her go away to phone Tony. A beetle-browed young man with great masses of black hair and an olive complexion, Tony lived in Greg's house and was a kind of handyman. He did work around the house and was also (according to Emily) very good at restoration of antique furniture; stripping paint, re-assembling broken parts, that sort of thing.

There was now a renewed scraping and rasping at the lock, as Greg struggled to get the door open before Emily's return. I found myself feeling unexpected warmth and liking toward Greg. He wasn't a bad person; an opportunist with my wife, but not in general a bad person. Would he marry her now? They could live in this house, he'd had more to do with its furnishing than I. Or would this room hold too grim a memory, would Emily have to sell the house, live elsewhere? She might have to sell at a low price; as a realtor, I knew the difficulty in selling a house where a suicide has taken place. No matter how much they may joke about it, people are still afraid of the supernatural. Many of them would believe this room was haunted.

It was then I finally realized the room *was* haunted. With me! *I'm a ghost,* I thought, thinking the word for the first time, in utter blank astonishment. I'm a ghost.

Oh, how dismal! To hover here, to be a boneless fleshless aching *presence* here, to be a kind of ectoplasmic mildew seeping through the days and nights, alone, unending, a stupid pain-racked misery-filled observer of the comings and goings of strangers—she *would* sell the house, she'd have to, I was sure of that. Was this my punishment? The punishment of the suicide, the solitary hell of him who takes his own life. To remain forever a sentient nothing, bound by a force greater than gravity itself to the place of one's finish.

I was distracted from this misery by a sudden agitation in the key on this side of the lock. I saw it quiver and jiggle like something alive, and then it popped out—it seemed to *leap* out, itself a suicide leaping from a cliff—and clattered to the floor, and an instant later the door was pushed open and Greg's ashen face stared

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at my own purple face, and after the astonishment and horror, his expression shifted to revulsion—and contempt?—and he backed out, slamming the door. Once more the key turned in the lock, and I heard him hurry away downstairs.

The clock read 9:58. *Now* he was telling her. *Now* he was giving her a drink to calm her. *Now* he was phoning the police. *Now* he was talking to her about whether or not to admit their affair to the police; what would they decide?

"Noooooooo!"

The clock read 10:07. What had taken so long? Hadn't he even called the police yet?

She was coming up the stairs, stumbling and rushing, she was pounding on the door, screaming my name. I shrank into the corners of the room, I *felt* the thuds of her fists against the door, I cowered from her. She can't come in, dear God don't let her in! I don't care what she's done, I don't care about anything, just don't let her see me! *Don't let me see her!*

Greg joined her. She screamed at him, he persuaded her, she raved, he argued, she demanded, he denied. "Give me the key. Give me the key."

Surely he'll hold out, surely he'll take her away, surely he's stronger, more forceful.

He gave her the key.

No. *This* cannot be endured. *This* is the horror beyond all else. She came in, she walked into the room, and the sound she made will always live inside me. That cry wasn't human; it was the howl of every creature that has ever despaired. *Now* I know what despair is, and why I called my own state mere truculence.

Now that it was too late, Greg tried to restrain her, tried to hold her shoulders and draw her from the room, but she pulled away and crossed the room toward . . . not toward *me*. I was everywhere in the room, driven by pain and remorse, and Emily walked toward the carcass. She looked at it almost tenderly, she even reached up and touched its swollen cheek. "Oh, Ed," she murmured.

The pains were as violent now as in the moments before my death. The slashing torment in my throat, the awful distension in my head, they made me squirm in agony all over again; but I *could not* feel her hand on my cheek.

Greg followed her, touched her shoulder again, spoke her name, and immediately her face dissolved, she cried out once more and

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wrapped her arms around the corpse's legs and clung to it, weeping and gasping and uttering words too quick and broken to understand. Thank *God* they were too quick and broken to understand!

Greg, that fool, did finally force her away, though he had great trouble breaking her clasp on the body. But he succeeded, and pulled her out of the room, and slammed the door, and for a little while the body swayed and turned, until it became still once more.

That was the worst. Nothing could be worse than that. The long days and nights here—how long must a stupid creature like myself *haunt* his death-place before release?—would be horrible, I knew that, but not so bad as this. Emily would survive, would sell the house, would slowly forget. (Even I would slowly forget.) She and Greg could marry. She was only 36, she could still be a mother.

For the rest of the night I heard her wailing, elsewhere in the house. The police did come at last, and a pair of grim silent white-coated men from the morgue entered the room to cut me—it—down. They bundled it like a broken toy into a large oval wicker basket with long wooden handles, and they carried it away.

I had thought I might be forced to stay with the body, I had feared the possibility of being buried with it, of spending eternity as a thinking nothingness in the black dark of a casket, but the body left the room and I remained behind.

A doctor was called. When the body was carried away the room door was left open, and now I could plainly hear the voices from downstairs. Tony was among them now, his characteristic surly monosyllable occasionally rumbling, but the main thing for a while was the doctor. He was trying to give Emily a sedative, but she kept wailing, she kept speaking high hurried frantic sentences as though she had too little time to say it all. "I did it!" she cried, over and over. "I did it! I'm to blame!"

Yes. That was the reaction I'd wanted, and expected, and here it was, and it was horrible. Everything I had desired in the last moments of my life had been granted to me, and they were all ghastly beyond belief. I *didn't* want to die! I *didn't* want to give Emily such misery! And more than all the rest I didn't want to be here, seeing and hearing it all.

They did quiet her at last, and then a policeman in a rumpled

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blue suit came into the room with Greg, and listened while Greg described everything that had happened. While Greg talked, the policeman rather grumpily stared at the remaining length of rope still knotted around the beam, and when Greg had finished the policeman said, "You're a close friend of his?"

"More of his wife. She works for me. I own The Bibelot, an antique shop out on the New York road."

"Mm. Why on earth did you let her in here?"

Greg smiled; a sheepish embarrassed expression. "She's stronger than I am," he said. "A more forceful personality. That's always been true."

It was with some surprise I realized it *was* true. Greg was something of a weakling, and Emily was very strong. (*I* had been something of a weakling, hadn't I? Emily was the strongest of us all.)

The policeman was saying, "Any idea why he'd do it?"

"I think he suspected his wife was having an affair with me." Clearly Greg had rehearsed this sentence, he'd much earlier come to the decision to say it and had braced himself for the moment. He blinked all the way through the statement, as though standing in a harsh glare.

The policeman gave him a quick shrewd look. "Were you?"

"Yes."

"She was getting a divorce?"

"No. She doesn't love me, she loved her husband."

"Then why sleep around?"

"Emily wasn't sleeping *around*," Greg said, showing offense only with that emphasized word. "From time to time, and not very often, she was sleeping with me."

"Why?"

"For comfort." Greg too looked at the rope around the beam, as though it had become me and he was awkward speaking in its presence. "Ed wasn't an easy man to get along with," he said carefully. "He was moody. It was getting worse."

"Cheerful people don't kill themselves," the policeman said.

"Exactly. Ed was depressed most of the time, obscurely angry now and then. It was affecting his business, costing him clients. He made Emily miserable but she wouldn't leave him, she loved him. I don't know what she'll do now."

"You two won't marry?"

"Oh, no." Greg smiled, a bit sadly. "Do you think we murdered

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him, made it look like suicide so we could marry?"

"Not at all," the policeman said. "But what's the problem? You already married?"

"I am homosexual."

The policeman was no more astonished than I. He said, "I don't get it."

"I live with my friend; that young man downstairs. I am—capable—of a wider range, but my preferences are set. I am very fond of Emily, I felt sorry for her, the life she had with Ed. I told you our physical relationship was infrequent. And often not very successful."

Oh, Emily. Oh, poor Emily.

The policeman said, "Did Thornburn know you were, uh, that way?"

"I have no idea. I don't make a public point of it."

"All right." The policeman gave one more half-angry look around the room, then said, "Let's go."

They left. The door remained open, and I heard them continue to talk as they went downstairs, first the policeman asking, "Is there somebody to stay the night? Mrs. Thornburn shouldn't be alone."

"She has relatives in Great Barrington. I phoned them earlier. Somebody should be arriving within the hour."

"You'll stay until then? The doctor says she'll probably sleep, but just in case—"

"Of course."

That was all I heard. Male voices murmured a while longer from below, and then stopped. I heard cars drive away.

How complicated men and women are. How stupid are simple actions. I had never understood anyone, least of all myself.

The room was visited once more that night, by Greg, shortly after the police left. He entered, looking as offended and repelled as though the body were still here, stood the chair up on its legs, climbed on it, and with some difficulty untied the remnant of rope. This he stuffed partway into his pocket as he stepped down again to the floor, then returned the chair to its usual spot in the corner of the room, picked the key off the floor and put it in the lock, switched off both bedside lamps and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Now I was in darkness, except for the faint line of light under the door, and the illuminated numerals of the clock. How long one

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minute is! That clock was my enemy, it dragged out every minute, it paused and waited and paused and waited till I could stand it no more, and then it waited longer, and *then* the next number dropped into place. Sixty times an hour, hour after hour, all night long. I couldn't stand one night of this, how could I stand eternity?

And how could I stand the torment and torture inside my brain? That was much worse now than the physical pain, which never entirely left me. I had been right about Emily and Greg, but at the same time I had been hopelessly brainlessly wrong. I had been right about my life, but wrong; right about my death, but wrong. How *much* I wanted to make amends, and how impossible it was to do anything any more, anything at all. My actions had all tended to this, and ended with this: black remorse, the most dreadful pain of all.

I had all night to think, and to feel the pains, and to wait without knowing what I was waiting for or when—or if—my waiting would ever end. Faintly I heard the arrival of Emily's sister and brother-in-law, the murmured conversation, then the departure of Tony and Greg. Not long afterward the guestroom door opened, but almost immediately closed again, no one having entered, and a bit after that the hall light went out, and now only the illuminated clock broke the darkness.

When next would I see Emily? Would she ever enter this room again? It wouldn't be as horrible as the first time, but it would surely be horror enough.

Dawn grayed the window shade, and gradually the room appeared out of the darkness, dim and silent and morose. Apparently it was a sunless day, which never got very bright. The day went on and on, featureless, each protracted minute marked by the clock. At times I dreaded someone's entering this room, at other times I prayed for something, anything—even the presence of Emily herself—to break this unending boring *absence*. But the day went on with no event, no sound, no activity anywhere—they must be keeping Emily sedated through this first day—and it wasn't until twilight, with the digital clock reading 6:52, that the door again opened and a person entered.

At first I didn't recognize him. An angry-looking man, blunt and determined, he came in with quick ragged steps, switched on both bedside lamps, then shut the door with rather more force than necessary, and turned the key in the lock. Truculent, his

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manner was, and when he turned from the door I saw with incredulity that he was *me*. Me! I wasn't dead, I was alive! But how could that be?

And what was that he was carrying? He picked up the chair from the corner, carried it to the middle of the room, stood on it—

No! No!

He tied the rope around the beam. The noose was already in the other end, which he slipped over his head and tightened around his neck.

Good God, *don't*!

He kicked the chair away.

The instant I kicked the chair away I wanted it back, but gravity was turning my former wish to its present command; the chair would not right itself from where it lay on the floor, and my 193 pounds would not cease to urge downward from the rope thick around my neck.

There was pain, of course, quite horrible pain centered in my throat, but the most astounding thing was the way my cheeks seemed to swell. I could barely see over their round red hills, my eyes staring in agony at the door, *willing* someone to come in and rescue me, though I knew there was no one in the house, and in any event the door was carefully locked. My kicking legs caused me to twist and turn, so that sometimes I faced the door and sometimes the window, and my shivering hands struggled with the rope so deep in my flesh I could barely find it and most certainly could not pull it loose.

I was frantic and horrified, yet at the same time my brain possessed a cold corner of aloof observation. I seemed now to be everywhere in the room at once, within my writhing body but also without, seeing my frenzied spasms, the thick rope, the heavy beam, the mismatched pair of lit bedside lamps throwing my convulsive double shadow on the walls, the closed locked door, the white-curtained window with its shade drawn all the way down. *This is death*

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 506th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . about a character new to EQMM—a court reporter—and some of the truly frightening aspects of his job . . .

The author, D. O. Bell, is not yet thirty. He is a graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law, and his wife is now a law student. Mr. Bell has an unusual hobby—a "near-compulsion for playing croquet." In 1977 he was champion of the Mississippi Croquet Association Invitational Tournament. He has written for local college publications and for his university Yearbook and Law Journal. He presently publishes "The Croquet News" and "smokes Wolf Brothers Crooks" . . .

TRIAL AND ERROR

by D. O. BELL

It was my fastidiousness for correct grammar that was the beginning of it all. It started so innocently, with such good intentions. I remember the very first time I did it. The judge asked the witness, "Are you sure this is the man which you saw?" I wrote instead, "Are you sure this is the man *that* you saw." I could have written *whom*, but *that* is correct also. I did it so quickly. It was an instant impulse apparently so strong that it won out over all my years of training and incessantly reinforced conditioning. But there it was—*that* instead of *which*.

Several weeks went by, and several hundred grammatical errors, before I changed the wording of another court record. Then it happened for the second time. The judge was again the object of my correction. Now, ever since I had corrected the judge that first time, I had heard one witness after another butcher the King's English. That's not even counting what the lawyers had done to the language. But when Judge Hamilton said, "These people, who

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the plaintiffs should not have even sued'. . ."—well, I simply had to change *who* to *whom*.

After that it became easier and easier for me to correct the judge's grammar. Little twinges of guilt struck me from time to time, but I figured: Whom did it hurt? All I was doing was making it look as if the judge's sixth-grade English teacher had earned her pay. It made absolutely no legal difference. After a while it got so that my ear served as a filter for the judge's spoken words. Nothing but perfect grammar went into the record.

That was the beginning; too bad it was not the ending. Otherwise I would not be writing this.

During a court recess one morning I was having a cup of tea in the County Building coffee shop. One of the lawyers involved in the case came in, and seeing that I was alone, asked if he could join me.

"Sure, Mr. Marks," I said, "have a seat."

"I guess they can't start the court without the court reporter," he said to me.

"The record is safe as long as I'm down here, I suppose," I said. That statement turned out to be chillingly prophetic.

"Court reporters have always intrigued me," he said. "How are you able to go so fast?"

"Practise, I guess."

"I'm still amazed. I admire the talent you people have."

"Thank you," I said, and I could tell he was being sincere and friendly. He had nothing to gain by patronizing the court reporter. At least, he did not think he did.

"How'd you get to be a court reporter, John?" Mr. Marks asked.

"Well, when I was growing up, for some reason I enjoyed writing down what other people were saying. My parents thought I was going to grow up to be a reporter, a *real* reporter. I got a typewriter for my eighth birthday and I went crazy with it. Then they thought I was going to be a writer. That wasn't my line either. But I knew that men didn't usually become secretaries. Then one day, when I was in junior high, our civics class sat in on a trial for an afternoon. Everybody in the class came away wanting to be lawyers except me. The court reporter had fascinated me. And that reporter was a man.

"I decided right then that was the job for me. After that, many days after school I'd go down to the courthouse to watch a trial in progress and see the court reporter. Whenever there was some

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question concerning what had been said, the judge would turn to the court reporter, and the court reporter always had the answer. He was the all-knowing one in the courtroom."

"Do you still enjoy it?" Mr. Marks asked.

"Oh, yes, very much."

"That's nice to hear. I suppose I had better go check my notes before the trial resumes," Mr. Marks said. "I enjoyed chatting with you, John. Let me pay for your tea." He made it a statement not a request and had left before I could respond.

That trial lasted three days, and during the course of the trial I noticed that Mr. Marks's grammar was perfect, letter-perfect. On the rare occasions he made a mistake, he would pause and say, "Strike that," which is like saying, "Erase that and begin again." Unlike the judge, he recognized and corrected his own grammatical mistakes.

The other lawyer in the trial, a man named Phillips, arrived early for trial one morning. I came into the courtroom to set up my table for trial. No one else was in the courtroom.

"Morning," Phillips said.

"Good morning," I said.

"Another day at the grindstone, huh?"

"Pardon me?"

"I mean, it must get awful boring sittin' there all day takin' down what everybody says every time they say somethin'."

"Only when the grammar is bad," I said.

"How is it a man gets to be a secretary anyway?" he asked in the same tone he used when he was making his move for the kill on cross-examination.

"I'm not a secretary," I said. "I'm a court reporter, a distinction someone in your business should have made by now."

"How is it a man gets to be a court reporter then?"

"Quick hands," I said.

Throughout the trial Phillips committed mayhem on the English language as we know it. The judge didn't do much better, but I kept correcting the judge on the record.

Phillips won this case and gloated over it.

Of course, some of these cases were being appealed, which meant that the transcripts of the trials, corrected grammar and all, were going to the Justices of the State Supreme Court. If any of the Justices noticed the drastic improvement in grammar in Judge Hamilton's remarks, I never heard about it.

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Then came the will contest of Old Cyrus Morton who died leaving an estate in excess of $1,000,000. The will had been very recently drawn. This will named four beneficiaries, the same four named in the will he had made 15 years before. The trouble with the new will was the new distribution. He left to his wife of 52 years and his two sons $10 each, the remainder to his Swedish housekeeper who could barely speak English.

Naturally, the wife and sons contested the will. Mr. Marks represented them, and Phillips represented the housekeeper. Now it is a chore to record the babblings of an illiterate buffoon asking questions of an alien.

"Tell us, Miss Svenson, was it a fact that you taken care of, well, that you and only you was the one who saw that Mr. Morton's, that you saw that Mr. Morton took his medicine and did the exercises his doctor ordered him and taken him to see the doctor personally ever' time he went to see the doctor or was supposed to go see him?"

"Zess, thas is right."

Well, Phillips tried to make her out a saint. He tried to show that she had selflessly taken care of the old bird for several years and cared only for his well-being while his wife paid attention only to her own interests and could not wait for old Cy to die so the estate would be hers and her sons.

The jury bought it. That little Swedish nymph played so innocent it was sickening. And when Mr. Marks tried to make her out to be the scheming witch she was, she'd start to cry ever so slightly, and then the tears would stream down her face until half of the jury was poking around in their pockets trying to find handkerchiefs.

Mr. Marks had contested the will on two points: the old man's mental incompetence when he made his last will and the housekeeper's undue influence on him when he made the will leaving virtually everything to her. It was obvious to me that Mr. Marks was right on both counts, but the jury let the will stand as it was. I knew Mr. Marks would appeal to the State Supreme Court, and I was sure he had a good chance for a reversal.

It was on the last question of the trial that I did it.

This was the first time I had ever changed anything but the judge's grammar. Mr. Marks asked Miss Svenson, "Whose idea was it to make a new will?" In her rudimentary way Miss Svenson replied, "Cy idea."

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Before I even realized what I had done, I had written for the court record, "My idea." The fact that I had done it terrified me, but something inside me would not let me correct it.

The case was reversed by the State Supreme Court, and I've heard nothing more about it. Mr. Marks has bought a new house, I understand.

The next alteration I made was done halfway absent-mindedly, but it was such a glaring change and such a legally substantial change that I felt the way a thief must feel when he moves from petty larceny to bank robbery. The case involved an accidental injury to a mentally retarded man who was employed at a simple job in a factory. He had been told repeatedly to stay away from a certain machine. Up until the accident he had never violated the order. On this day, however, he disobeyed and lost three of his fingers.

The judge told the jury that the standard it must use in deciding the case was the reasonable-man standard—what the reasonably prudent man would have done. Seeing that the plaintiff was an imbecile though, I recorded, " . . . what the reasonably prudent imbecile would have done."

The plaintiff lost the trial, appealed, and was granted a new trial. The case was subsequently settled out of court by the parties involved.

One morning Judge Hamilton asked me to come into his chambers.

"John," he said sternly, "you knew that was wrong."

My heart went into a panic. "What?"

"I've been reading the transcript of the Herman case—you know, the one where that idiot fellow lost three fingers."

"Yes sir," I said, bracing myself for punishment.

"Well," the judge continued, "it's funny how a man's mind works sometimes. Especially when you start getting older, I guess. When I was instructing the jury, I thought I was saying 'reasonably prudent *man*' and actually I must have said 'reasonably prudent *imbecile*.' Can you imagine my embarrassment when I read the record, John? You knew that was wrong, John, long as you've been a court reporter. You should've corrected me."

"It's my duty to record, Judge, not to correct," I said, as my systems returned to normal.

"I know it is, John. I'm not blaming you. You're an excellent court reporter. I just needed to talk to someone about a mistake

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that glaring. It's mighty embarrassing to have the Supreme Court reverse you on something as silly as that. You can just imagine them laughing it up when they read the record. Maybe it's time I stepped down."

"Now, Judge, don't be foolish."

"I mean it, John. When I really analyze it, do you know the honest reason I must give for remaining on the bench? It has nothing to do really with justice and order. It's the power. Plain and simple. I don't want to give up the power that you have in this position."

"Better you than somebody else," I said.

"I'm not so sure, John. It may sound trite, but it's still true that power is corrupting. It's a fever that trickles in, overtakes one little cell, then gradually takes over and controls. Power destroys you. I need to get out while I still have a little of my humanity left. And before I further embarrass myself with such flagrant errors."

"I think you're being hasty, Judge. You're overreacting."

"John," he said in a fatherly and judicious voice, "if you were ever in a position of controlling someone else's future, you'd know what I've been talking about. You become a slave to it."

The Bernardi case came next. Bernardi was accused of murdering six people over a period of three years. The murders had baffled the police, throwing the town of Sterling into a tizzy, until Bernardi was arrested. The State's case against Bernardi was overwhelming, and he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. However, his lawyers read the trial record, were astonished at the number of mistakes made, and wondered how all that could have passed them by during the trial. Bernardi was granted a new trial.

In the meantime the State's star witness had died, and Bernardi was acquitted the second time through. He is here in prison now though. He made it murder Number Seven not more than a month after his second trial and acquittal.

By the time of the Bernardi trial I had ceased to be a court reporter. Oh, I was still *employed* as a court reporter. I still sat at my table and wrote. But what I had become was a fiction writer. I wrote it all to please myself. I wrote *no* when the witness said *yes*. I wrote *black* for *white*. I wrote *high* for *low*. I even made up whole sentences and paragraphs if they sounded good to me.

The fever followed me out of the courtroom. I got to the point

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that I could not put anything on paper without lying. I'd leave a note to the milkman falsely accusing him of not leaving yesterday's order. I could not even write a letter home without filling it with wild imaginings. Nothing I wrote was true.

Finally, what did me in were my income-tax returns, boldly falsified and so easily disproved that Mr. Marks was helpless defending me. People were astonished at me. I simply told them it was as if some fever had possessed me.

The fever is not easily exorcised either. It is still with me. Everything I write is still a fabrication—including this.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 507th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the tale of a conscientious gardener—and of nature's way . . .

The author, Dave Thornburg, is in his mid-thirties. He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended thirteen schools before high-school graduation, four colleges ago. He has worked as a hodcarrier, a pipeliner, an advertising account executive, and a teacher. Currently he owns a small business in which he designs and manufactures kits for remote-controlled model aircraft. He considers himself "eminently qualified for a writing career by an inherited talent for living comfortably in poverty" . . .

NATURE'S WAY

by DAVE THORNBURG

This tree you see me cutting down was grown from a single apple seed. Conscientious gardener that I am, I prepared its soil most carefully, planted the seed judiciously (giving proper consideration to both the season and the phase of the moon), then nurtured the young shoot through tender adolescence to its present state of maturity. You may wonder, then, why I am cutting it down in its prime of life.

The answer should be obvious: it is barren. In spite of my solicitousness, in spite of all my labor, the tree has failed to bear a single apple. To a conscientious gardener like myself this is the unpardonable sin. Every seed is meant to produce, every seed is meant to bear fruit, according to its kind.

Even the seed of murder.

And should a seed refuse to bear, or produce a plant that requires an unnatural amount of assistance to reach fruition, then surely the gardener is justified in lopping it off. "Survival of the fittest," the Darwinists called it; it is nature's way.

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Such, I'm afraid, was the case with my late Aunt Alberta.

Not that she was cut down in her prime, exactly. She would, I believe, have been 84 next birthday. Nor had she ceased to "bear fruit," in a sense: for she still bore a full quart of apricot brandy up to her bedroom after dinner, just as she had done every evening for the 30 years my brother Raymond and I have lived with her. No human being who consumes 90 gallons of brandy a year can be considered worthless—at least, from a distiller's point of view.

Of course, neither Raymond nor I is a distiller.

I am, as I've indicated, a sort of gentleman gardener. Gradually, over the years, I've taken charge of all the gardening and landscaping on Alberta's estate. The hedges, the miles of cypresses lining the entrance road, as well as every detail of the formal gardens, are the fruits of my imagination, my overseeing, and my labor.

Brother Raymond's avocation, I'm afraid, is less easily described. He may perhaps have thought of himself as "companion" or "financial adviser" to Aunt Alberta; I'm told that the villagers prefer such terms as "toady" and "fellow alcoholic."

It's true Raymond has spent far more time than I have in currying the old woman's favor. The gap between my intelligence and the pickled remains of Alberta's mind was simply too great a chasm for the frail bridge of gratitude to span. Between Raymond and Alberta, however, the gap was narrower—if, indeed, it existed at all.

So I was not surprised when my aunt announced last spring that she had rewritten her will, naming Raymond the chief beneficiary of her estate.

"He *is* your older brother, Charles," she explained to me in boozy confidence. "And he has shown *so* much aptitude for running my affairs, while you spend your time puttering about the gardens and lawns.

"I think of you as the overseer of my grounds, while Raymond is the overseer of my assets. I am certain he will treat you generously, as a brother should. He has promised me faithfully that he will keep you on after I am gone." She patted me cheerfully if condescendingly on the wrist, as old women usually do to their nephews—or to their gardeners.

Still, I was less perturbed by this turn of events than you might suppose. I'm not a greedy person, and I had no great expectations

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regarding my share of Aunt Alberta's millions. Over and above the necessities of life I need only a good supply of chemicals and fertilizers the year round, and a few hundred new bulbs for spring planting, in order to complete the cycle of my happiness.

This spring, however, I discovered that my bulb and seed order had been canceled.

I was furious. I approached Aunt Alberta about the matter as calmly as I could under the circumstances.

"Oh, Charles," she said, going for my wrist again, "I simply *hated* doing it. You know how I love the greenery and all. But Raymond felt we were spending too much on appearances. He has *such* a level head about these things. He wants to put a tennis court and a swimming pool in the rear of the house, where the formal gardens are now. I have opposed it so far, because I felt it would spoil the view, but I suppose it *is* the modern thing to do. Gardens require so much in upkeep nowadays."

So I was to have no fresh green shoots to nurture and protect from the April frost, the predatory insect. No new plants to flower into unexpected beauty come summer and early fall. Of course, there were still the perennials, the plants and flowers of previous springtimes; and they would require much care and labor, as always. But of new varieties I was to have not a single bulb, not a solitary seed.

Ah, but fortunately I had on hand one seed which no one could deny me, one seed which even the most impoverished of gardeners may sow—the seed of murder. I planted it that evening, after Alberta had retired to her bedroom with her brandy.

Brother Raymond sat in the library, reading a news magazine and sipping one of those tulip-shaped glasses that drinking people refer to as "snifters."

"Good evening, Charles," he said, a bit thickly. "Join me in a spot of brandy?" It was a gesture of condescension on his part, for he knew my invariable reply. I have read that the breath of an alcoholic is capable of wilting the leaves of certain sensitive varieties of plants.

"Thank you, no," I replied, leavening my tone with just enough cordiality to avoid suspicion in his decidedly second-rate mind.

"I see you are studying the automobile brochures again," I said, nodding at an untidy stack of motoring magazines and dealer catalogues at his elbow. "Does Alberta still oppose your purchase of the Ferrari?"

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"Does she!" he replied, coming to life. "The old pinch-penny won't even consider leasing one for a trial. Not that I'm so terribly keen to have one, although they *are* awfully well-engineered machines—you might scan the figures in this *Car and Driver,* though I doubt you'll understand them. But a Ferrari on the grounds is just what we need to begin moving this dreary old place into the twentieth century."

"Yes, I suppose we are a bit 'out of it,' as they say," I replied, looking around at the comfortable dark mahogany paneling of the library walls, the hundreds of volumes on the shelves. The first editions on any single shelf were valuable enough to buy Raymond's longed-for Ferrari—or enough bulbs and supplies for a dozen planting seasons.

"Even the swimming pool you suggested would be a decided improvement," I lied, "but I suppose that idea has gone the way of the tennis court."

"It looks that way," he said glumly, draining the glass of brandy and refilling it immediately. "But I assumed you'd be pleased if your precious gardens are spared for another season." He was looking at me a bit suspiciously.

"To be quite truthful," I said, not being truthful, "the gardens are becoming a burden on my health. Not that I have any specific ailments, of course, but I begin to suspect that I am not so well endowed, constitutionally, as our Aunt Alberta. She appears to have another decade or two in her, at least."

"Do you think so?" Raymond asked, sitting up in his chair. Lately he had acquired the dreadful habit of slouching in it.

"Her mother, you recall, lived to be over a hundred, and I daresay *her* insides were not half so well preserved as Alberta's. I should think our aunt quite capable of hitting the century mark, barring some freak accident—such as the one that befell young Mildred Norton's grandmother."

"Who is Mildred Norton?" Raymond asked.

"An acquaintance of mine, at school some years ago. Her grandmother drank quite heavily and one morning she was found dead in her bed. Like Alberta, she was accustomed to propping herself up with large pillows, and one of them fell across her face in the night and smothered her."

"How terrible," Raymond said. "I thought one's reflexes would prevent such an accident. If you pull a blanket over the face of a sleeping child, he will push it away from his mouth instinctively."

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"Excessive alcohol can numb even the life-protecting reflexes," I answered. "I daresay the old woman was so inebriated she suffocated without moving a muscle. But enough of this morbid talk; I must be off to bed. Early tomorrow I begin spraying the looper caterpillars. They are down among my apricots, getting away with murder."

"Getting away with murder, are they?" Raymond muttered as I left the room.

Thus was the seed planted.

Nurturing the seed, caring for it, promoting its slow germination and gradual growth—these were simple tasks for a competent gardener, ably assisted as I was by Raymond's own greed and impatience. An occasional reference to Alberta's robust good health, a fleeting mention of the Ferrari, the pool, or some other of the "improvements" Raymond continued to covet—these sufficed as water and fertilizer.

As spring flowered into summer I even found it possible to check on the growth of my plant. By retiring before my brother and leaving my door slightly ajar, I could observe him when he passed Alberta's bedroom on the way to his own. With increasing frequency he would pause in the dim hallway and peer into the old woman's chamber.

The view was hardly the most splendid that her estate affords—I have seen it myself hundreds of times since childhood. The dark highly-polished hardwood floor; the ancient fourposter bed; the nightstand, cluttered with brandy bottles and toilet articles and presided over by the antique wooden radio that she played day and night. And in the center of the gray and disheveled bed, Aunt Alberta herself, dwarfed by the twin pillows that supported her, sleeping quietly as death, her mouth agape, her pale skin luminescent in the glare of the reading lamp.

This, on the nights when she forgot to turn out the lamp and thus cast the whole room into merciful darkness. Fortunately, the nights of her forgetfulness were few.

As the summer wore on, with its fierce afternoons and hot impatient nights, Raymond's pauses before the old woman's doorway grew longer and more meditative. And I, waiting breathlessly in the darkness behind my own door, watched my seed growing to maturity, leafing out, flowering . . . but would it ever bear fruit?

Perhaps not. My brother was struggling against two powerful taboos. Not only is the act of murder frowned on by our society,

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but in order to commit the act Raymond would have to violate a household taboo: *he would have to enter Aunt Alberta's room.*

Never, in the 30 years of our life here, had either of us been inside that room. It was forbidden to us as children, and the ban had never been lifted. Such a childhood prohibition is not easily overcome by an adult—particularly an adult of my brother's modest intelligence.

And then there was the additional stumbling block of Raymond's self-confidence. In the few months since he had taken over the reins of Alberta's galloping millions, he had lost money on at least three separate deals I knew of, and there were undoubtedly other failures as yet undisclosed. Such incidents served to heighten his frustration, but they must have done little to allay his perfectly natural fear of bungling the murder. The same thought had occurred to me: suppose he goes about it half-heartedly, and fails?

I felt the time was right for the conscientious gardener to step in: the hand pollination and the delicate graft were in order, if the solitary seed of my spring planting was ever to bear fruit.

My opportunity came in the dog days of late August.

The afternoon had been sultry and threatening; long after sunset the heat lightning continued its mouselike games behind the dark clouds. The air in the house was charged with ozone from the lightning, and with anger from the drunken dinner-table argument between my brother and my aunt. Their relations were steadily worsening; that night they almost came to blows. My aunt stormed off to her bedroom and the consolations of her bottle, while Raymond retired to the library to brood.

About 10:30 I stepped into the library on the pretext of returning a book. Raymond sat in his customary chair, nursing his customary drink.

"Is Aunt fiddling with her will again?" I asked him casually.

"What makes you think that?" he said.

"She had me call her lawyer this evening," I replied. "He's to come down from the city tomorrow morning, with the will. I supposed you knew about it."

I glanced furtively at him as I left the room. He was sitting upright, his eyes wide. The information had apparently had a salutary effect on his sobriety.

Unfortunately, it was a lie—a lie that I could easily be caught in the following morning when the lawyer arrived. For Aunt Al-

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berta had not spoken to me since dinner; I had summoned the lawyer in her name, but quite on my own.

I very much disliked placing myself in such a delicate position, but I believe that a truly conscientious gardener should know with certainty when to expect his harvest. And I expected mine that very night.

An hour later it came—in the form of my brother creeping stealthily past my door in his soft-soled shoes. He paused for some time in front of Alberta's darkened doorway, then quietly entered the room.

He could not have been in there more than half a dozen minutes before he emerged, looked nervously up and down the dark hallway, and quickly padded back to his room. When he was safely behind his own door, I closed mine quietly, and retired to await the dawn. I doubt that either of us slept well.

It was the maid who discovered the body. She ran screaming back down the stairs to the lawyer, who came up and very sensibly checked the old woman's pulse. She had none, of course.

Then he began to examine the circumstances of the death, and discovered, in addition to the pillow that had smothered her, a rather curious thing: it seems that a box of Alberta's talcum powder had spilled on the floor near her bed, and it showed not only the maid's footsteps, but others of a large and masculine outline—made with soft-soled shoes.

The prints led out the door and down the hall to Raymond's room. The lawyer summoned the police.

The police took my brother away. They also appropriated his shoes, for they still contained traces of the talc. I remained in my room through most of the proceedings, including a brief interrogation by a pleasant young detective who turned out to be something of a gentleman gardener himself.

Fortunately I was able to answer all his questions truthfully. This entire affair had entailed quite a distasteful amount of lying already, and I found the truth to be a welcome relief.

Raymond confessed to the murder, of course, so that none of my earlier prevarications was ever questioned. He was convicted with unseemly haste, for a family with our connections, and sentenced to pay the supreme penalty—leaving me to manage the estate according to my own tastes and abilities. You must see the new sunken gardens I've built—they are modeled on the famous Japanese Gardens of San Francisco, and are just behind the ser-

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vant's quarters, in the old meadow where the bog used to be.

Perhaps you are thinking that I ran an unnecessary risk in supposing my somewhat fallible brother would not bungle the murder attempt, leaving Alberta alive to expose my mendacity in the matter of summoning the lawyer.

Such, I assure you, was not the case.

For immediately on leaving my brother in his state of high agitation in the library that night, I proceeded upstairs to my aunt's room, put out the light which she had thoughtlessly left burning, and choked her to death with one of the pillows. Then, while still on her bed, I deliberately dumped the talcum powder off the nightstand onto the floor, and crawled away over the end of the bedstead, leaving no trace of my presence.

Raymond, poor fellow, confessed to the murder of a corpse—and this is the crime for which the state is about to lop him off in the prime of his life. Still, I must confess that he *is* a rather inferior specimen, brother or no; and the state, in this case, is merely acting the part of nature, as it were. For only the fittest must survive: that is nature's way.

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a *NEW* short story by

DAVID ELY

You will get nothing usual from David Ely—you know that by now. And his stories—strange, provocative, disturbing—always have deeper levels of meaning. In this new one the acute observations and perceptive details form a nightmare mosaic which reveals a curious kind of "civilized" crime that has terrifying implications for all of us . . .

GOING BACKWARD

by *DAVID ELY*

The old farmhouse in Herkimer County hadn't been lived in for many years. When the young people moved in, they found field mice in the parlor, and bird droppings in the kitchen; there were cobwebs everywhere, and dust, and mold. They set to work at once cleaning and making repairs. Walter patched the roof while Charles replaced weakened floorboards. Lewis and Jane began clearing out the barn, and Victor chopped away with a rusty sickle at the tangle of weeds and vines in the yard. Susan, sweeping upstairs, was disturbed by the discovery of a fox skeleton. She was superstitious, and considered this a bad omen. "We won't be happy here," she predicted to the others.

It was Lydia who found the trunk in the attic, full of old clothes and hats. She shook them out and aired them, and inspected them with interest. Some went back all the way to the 1890s, she knew. That evening she and Jane tried on a couple of the dresses, and after redoing their hair into severe Victorian buns, they made a surprise appearance at supper. Lewis and Charles, seized by the same amiable spirit, rushed off to the closet where Lydia had hung the clothes, and returned as a pair of lean and long-legged Gay Nineties sparks in checked suits, complete with handlebar mustaches drawn in chimney soot. "Remember the Maine!" cried

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Charles, striking a warlike pose before the hearth.

Victor got out his violin and played reels while the others danced by the candlelight, their laughter leaping and fading in the sweet summer darkness that enveloped the house. Walter and Susan, hearing the music, came over from the cottage across the lane to join the dancing. "Costumes first!" cried Lydia, so the newcomers had to rummage about in the closet to find something to put on. Susan chose a beribboned bonnet, and Walter found a derby. When Victor's arm tired, Lydia and Jane sang duets, and then Charles performed what he remembered of a monologue from "The Drunkard," and after that they sat on the porch listening to the owl in the woods and the tinkling of the wind-chimes Jane had hung in the pear tree.

The night air was soft and warm; they could count the stars. "Oh, I wish—" Lydia began. Susan tried to stop her: "Don't wish! It's bad luck!" Lydia wouldn't mind her. "I wish it really were 1890," she said, "and I wish we could stay in it forever." Susan sucked in her breath. "There's something moving in the woods!" she said. The others laughed—Susan was always seeing things that moved in the dark—but she went inside and made Walter come in, too, to keep her company.

The seven young people, being artisans of modest means, had found in the farm property exactly what they had to have—ample living and working space for virtually no rent. Naturally, there were reasons for this bargain. The house was just barely habitable, and the cottage had only one room whose floorboards weren't rotted. There were no amenities—no electricity, no telephone, no running water. The artisans used kerosene lamps and candles for light. Water they drew from an old well; so far nobody had fallen ill. A fire took the chill off the occasional cool summer evening—but how they would manage to keep from freezing in the storms and snows of an upstate New York winter, the young people had no idea. At least there was plenty of wood around. They used it for cooking, having found a woodstove that drew nicely.

A further reason for the token rent was the fact that the place was isolated. The lane had once gone all the way east to the village, but had been cut off when a change in the water regime of the zone created a swamp, submerging the low-lying land in muck and weeds. The north and west sides of the property were blocked by thick, vine-choked woods. The only way out was to the south, through an old pasture that hadn't been used for years. This led

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to an apple orchard, likewise abandoned and growing wild. Beyond that a cow path meandered down to the Henneman farm, where there was a dirt road which eventually reached the village.

A jeep could have bounced across the pasture, but the young people had no motor vehicle of any kind. They walked to the village—it was nearly three miles away—unless they had heavy things to transport, and then they pushed along a wooden cart they'd found in the barn.

Charles, light-spirited, began wearing his Nineties suit into the village when it was his turn to go in for food and supplies. The fabric had a yellow check pattern, and he could be seen for quite some distance across the pasture, strolling along like a dandy in his high collar and derby hat. Lydia reproved him, for he'd ripped the back of the coat. "If you like that style, I'll make you a suit," she told him. "I'm copying a dress for myself." Lewis wanted a suit, too. So did Victor, but he was shy about being overweight, and didn't want Lydia to take his measurements, so she did it by guess, and the suit fit him quite well.

By the end of summer, she and Jane had created a period wardrobe, fashioning new clothes and altering old ones. It amused them to dress up. Lewis and Charles were cultivating real handlebar mustaches. Victor had found a pince-nez in an old desk. He parted his hair in the middle, practised fierce expressions, and gave imitations of Teddy Roosevelt, whom he somewhat resembled. In the evenings they would sing or dance or sit around playing Nineties' games—holding spirit séances, and acting out charades. With mock solemnity Charles would initiate discussions of "current" issues—would there be war with Spain? Would McKinley defeat Bryan for the Presidency?

It wasn't just a joke, though. In this forgotten rural corner of Herkimer County the young people were in fact living much the way their great-grandfathers had lived. It was as if they had taken a backward step through time. They didn't miss the Twentieth Century. Their air was pure and sweet; their water had a wholesome tang. The woods were alive with squirrels and birds; a family of pheasants lived at the edge of the pasture.

"Just think," said Victor. "We've discovered what it means to live a cleaner, simpler, healthier life. We don't have any waste or pollution, and we're away from the consumer mentality. Buy, buy, buy—that's all people know how to do nowadays. If only they could see the way we live. If only we could show them!"

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As far as possible, the young people lived off the land. Jane established a vegetable patch behind the house. Everybody helped with the weeding. There were blackberries in the woods, and mushrooms down by the swamp. Susan traded earthenware pots for a pair of pullets from the Henneman farm, so there were fresh eggs. Life wasn't easy, but morale was high. Even the prospect of winter wasn't daunting.

They took turns minding the shop in the village where their craftwork was displayed for sale, and thus they became well-known to the local people, who regarded them with a tolerant eye. Villagers would drop by to admire Lewis' fieldstone sculpture and Jane's lacework. Occasionally they would barter—a crate of apples for one of Victor's straw baskets, or a sack of sweet corn for a pair of Charles's wooden serving spoons.

The villagers would listen with apparent attention to Victor's expositions of what he came to call his 1890 philosophy of life, and they derived much enjoyment from the occasional spectacle of the wooden farm cart creaking and clattering along the street. For the most part, however, the locals left the artisans alone. No one went calling at the old farm, except for a few children, who wandered out to watch Lydia at her loom or Walter and Susan at their potters wheels. When school began, not even the children came.

Fall brought brisk days and frosty nights. The woods burst out in gold and scarlet leaves, and a dozen pumpkins ripened in the vegetable patch. The tourist season was over, so the young people closed the shop in the village. They were busy laying in food and supplies for the winter. To save on fires, Walter and Susan left the cottage, and moved in with the others.

Charles built storm windows for the north side of the house. Lewis and Walter split logs and chopped kindling. Jane caulked the floorboards. Susan discovered a sled and some snowshoes in the barn, and just as well, for it snowed early and heavily that year. They spent Christmas snowbound, all except Jane, who had gone home to Buffalo for her younger sister's wedding, and couldn't get back until after New Year's Day.

Charles lined the lane with life-sized snowmen, and Lewis sculptured the heads into likenesses of such Nineties notables as Queen Victoria and Bismarck and John L. Sullivan. Lydia so cultivated the birds with crumbs and crusts that the kitchen windows were wingdark at feeding time. There were snowball fights,

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and moonlit tramps through the icy woods, and skating on the Henneman stock pond.

The cold, however, made working difficult. Fingers got stiff; materials, too, became contrary. In February, when a two-day blizzard struck, the young people gave up entirely and spent all their time trying to keep warm. The two-day blizzard was followed by a three-day blizzard, and the following morning Susan peered out through the shutters, and shrieked, for the snow had drifted so high in the lane that Charles's figures were buried to the neck, and the lifelike heads, with the severe and dignified expressions Lewis had given them, were staring at her with rigid curiosity out of their white unwinking eyes.

During the winter the young men managed to make the trek into the village at least once a week to buy a sled-load of provisions, and to let people know that all was well out at the farm. It was harder going in March, when the thaw made the pasture spongy, and muddied the cow path. The arrival of spring set them all working again, invigorated by the freshness and warmth of the season, and proud that they had got through the winter so well, with no worse casualties than Victor's violin, whose soundboard had warped from the damp and cold.

In April a reporter from the county weekly newspaper came out, having heard that the group might be worth a little story. "They tell me 1890 is your bag," the reporter said, which displeased Victor, who had taken a dislike to modern slang; but as the reporter was a pleasant young man, and seemed sincerely interested in what he saw there, Victor soon warmed up and explained everything at great length. The weekly reporter wrote an article which in turn stirred the daily newspaper in Albany to send one of its feature writers, accompanied by a photographer. They did a Sunday picture story—"Craft Commune Turns Back Clock"—with photographs of Jane and Susan with their leg-of-mutton sleeves, churning butter, and of Lydia with her topknot, laboring at her loom, and of the men working, too, and then one of the entire group in full costume, posed formally in front of the barn, and looking very authentic.

On April 22 the young people had their first sightseers, a husband and wife from Troy, who explained that they happened to be driving through the village when they remembered the feature story in the Albany paper, and so had stopped to ask how to get out to the farm.

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Victor welcomed them and showed them the workshops and living quarters. The man from Troy was fascinated by Lydia's loom, and his wife was so charmed by Lewis' stone pieces that she kept crying out in amazement, "You did that? You really made that yourself?" Before they left, the visitors asked if they might buy something. They chose a lace handkerchief, and a small rug, and a stone owl, and then in a burst of enthusiasm decided on a pair of ladderback chairs.

Charles and Walter helped them carry their purchases across the pasture and through the abandoned apple orchard and down to the cow path behind the Henneman farm, where the car was parked. "I really admire what you kids are doing," the Troy man said, shaking hands, "and I know you'll have a real big success."

The next day a family from Schenectady came by in the morning, admired everything, and bought a stack of Victor's baskets. That afternoon two girls from Herkimer came bouncing across the pasture on their motorcycles, making a terrible racket, but they were so merry that the artisans forgave them, and invited them for supper. The girls said they'd better call home first. Lydia explained there was no telephone. The girls stared at her. "No phone?" one of them said. "Honest? Well, God, I mean, that's quaint."

The weather turned warmer and the woods greened. There were frogs in the swamp, and rabbits raiding the vegetable patch. A family of raccoons, it was discovered, had wintered in the cottage. Visitors would occasionally appear, having hiked across the pasture. They were friendly and agreeable, and always apologized for disturbing the young people. Their number increased in June. By the middle of the month hardly a day would go by without a few of them, frequently several at a time.

On Saturdays and Sundays there was a constant flow of people. They peered at the workshops in the barn, took snapshots of the house, and listened with reflective expressions to Victor's explanations. Susan didn't care for the sightseers. They were polite and quiet, but all those clicking cameras made her nervous, and there were cigarette butts and peanut shells strewn about the yard. Victor urged her to be tolerant.

"These people are really interested in the way we live," he said. "Our example is going to make them question their own standards." Over the winter he and Jane had stitched samplers bearing such mottoes as "Waste Not, Want Not" and "Make Do With

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Less." The visitors had bought them all, which Victor considered a sign of their receptivity to a simpler way of life. "I still wish they wouldn't come," Susan said.

But the tourists kept coming. Even rainy days didn't keep them away. They came, looked, and bought. There was no need to reopen the shop in the village. Everything was snapped up on the spot. The young people couldn't make enough for the demand. Rather than depart empty-handed, visitors would ask for something as a souvenir—a handful of nails, or a mug which had cracked in a firing. They even wanted to pay, although naturally the artisans couldn't accept money for such things.

"You fellows ought to build a decent driveway in here," said one man, as he watched Charles and Lewis labor across the pasture with the cart. "That's the first rule of business—easy access for your clients." Lewis explained that they didn't have the money to build a drive, and besides it wasn't their property. "Well, at least you ought to do something about where folks park their cars," the man said, and it was true that the cow path was a mess. Scores of automobiles backing and turning had churned up the earth and broken down the sides of the banks. When it rained, mud sucked at the hubcaps. On busy days the racket of honks and grinding engines could be heard all the way across the pasture.

Susan put up a note on the barn asking people not to walk in during working hours, but the idea that they were out there reading her note distracted her, and she thought she heard them whispering. Besides, the taller men peeped in at the window right behind her, so in a way it was worse than having them inside. She finally compromised, opening the studio from eleven to twelve every weekday morning. Visitors fingered the wet clay and sniffed the glazes, even though she kept telling them not to.

"They just don't pay attention," she lamented to the others. "They drift around like sheep, and how can you communicate with sheep?" Victor maintained a more positive attitude. "They're not sheep," he said. "Many of them are sincerely interested in fighting against the insane waste of the consumer society. Why, I've even gotten some invitations to speak before their local civic organizations."

Victor had problems, too. A little boy got sick all over some new baskets, and somebody's dog ran off with his deerstalker cap and ate it. The most annoying thing was the discovery that a novelty firm in Utica had copied the "Waste Not, Want Not" sampler and

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was producing it in plastic by the hundreds, machine-made.

By late July the litter in the yard had increased to the point where Victor felt obliged to put out one of his large baskets as a trash receptacle. A few days later a tourist tossed a smoldering cigarette butt into it; the basket and its contents caught fire and burned, leaving a large withered patch in the grass. Lewis went into the village to buy a metal trash can. On his return he helped some people push their car free of the mud at the cow path, and he noticed how the gouging and tearing of the cars had not only widened the track but extended it several yards into the old orchard. When he reported this, Susan gave a little shiver. "The cars are coming," she said. "The cars are making their own road."

The first guided tour appeared August 3—twenty men, women, and children preceded by a man wearing an armband and holding a little megaphone. They were vacationers at a nearby Adirondack resort, making a day trip, and they insisted on getting autographs. "I think what you're doing is wonderful," one man told Jane. A woman admired Lydia's dress, and wanted to buy it. Lydia said no as politely as she could. The woman had crowded up beside the loom and was fingering the dress as Lydia tried to work. Susan shut the barn door, but people kept opening it and peering in.

"Please go away," she told them. The visitors seemed abashed and confused. "But we've got tickets," one of them said plaintively. Susan finally went off into the woods to be alone. A family was having a picnic there. The wife offered her a chicken leg. "Say, you must be one of the actresses," she said. "I don't mind saying it's a swell show."

Susan began weeping at sunset. She cried late into the night. The next day she put on her bluejeans and sweater, and left. Walter went with her, arguing. The others could hear their voices in the pasture. Later Walter came back. "She can't stand any more," was all he would say. He tramped around the barn cramming tools into his knapsack, and then he left, too.

Victor started after him, but a woman visitor stopped him, taking his sleeve. "Hi, there," she said, and she told him her name and where she was from, and she asked if she could take her little boy into the kitchen and make him a sandwich. She offered Victor a dollar. "I don't know how much it is," she said. "Do you have a price list?"

The departure of Susan and Walter discouraged the others, and

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they told Victor something would have to be done about the sightseers. "If there were just a few, it would be all right," said Lewis, "but we can't work with all these people crowding in." Victor agreed, and said he would go into the village to talk the situation over with the chief of police, Mr. Grimes.

As Victor crossed the pasture and orchard, he saw that there were brightly painted arrow-shaped signs pointing the way to the farm. He tried to wrest one from the earth, but it was securely implanted. All he managed to do was get a splinter in his hand. The signs were fixed along the cow path, too, and even at the Henneman place. Mr. Henneman stood by his gate, smiling, in his Sunday clothes. He was charging a quarter for every car he let through.

At the police station Victor told Mr. Grimes that the tourist situation had got out of hand and requested the assistance of the law. Mr. Grimes said that the police could prevent trespassing on private property, but he pointed out that the loss of new business would hurt the town, and cited the example of his brother's gas station, which had tripled its sales. "And by the way," he added, "you kids have been selling merchandise out there without a license, which could mean a heavy fine, so if I were you I wouldn't push on the trespassing thing. Anyway, I've only got two men, and one of 'em's sick."

By mid-August there was a snack stand in the pasture where a woman sold plastic-wrapped sandwiches and cold drinks. In the lane itself a college boy strolled back and forth hawking slides and postcards showing the artisans at work, all in photographs of unnatural clarity and eye-shattering color. In one photo Victor's hazel eyes were an electric blue; in another, Jane's maroon shawl was as bright as blood.

"Who said you could sell these things here?" Victor asked. The college boy said it was his father, who had a little printing business at Lake George, and he added that he had persuaded his father not to charge the young people anything, even though the slides and postcards were valuable publicity. "I told him you were into ecology and stuff," he explained.

Lewis came back from the village one afternoon to say he'd been told at the post office that the county authorities planned to drain the marsh and rebuild the lane. A tourist overheard him, and expressed concern. "Don't let 'em do it, boys," he said. "It'll ruin this place if you get cars in here. Fight that road—fight it."

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Victor said the opening of the lane probably wouldn't matter much. Motorcyclists and beach buggies came roaring across the pasture as it was, and an enterprising villager had established a jeep service, ferrying visitors from the cow-path parking lot at a dollar a head.

The first tourists of the day were arriving early, shortly after breakfast, and the last ones were still wandering about after sunset. Sitting on the porch in the evening, the young people had been startled more than once by an apologetic voice from the darkness, asking for the loan of a flashlight—and of course Victor or Charles or Lewis would have to guide these tardy sightseers back to their cars.

The number of tourists increased and it was this that led to Charles's accident. People were anxious not to miss a thing, particularly when the artisans were exercising their skills. Charles's woodworking had a dramatic flair to it, the chips flying as the forms took shape under the strokes of his chisel, so he always had quite a crowd pressing eagerly around. One afternoon someone was bumped from behind and jostled Charles's elbow, causing him to run his chisel deep into his hand.

Jane medicated the cut, and bandaged it, to stop the bleeding, but Charles was awake half of the night with pain. The next day he decided to go to the doctor, and was about to set off when the woods burst into flame, having been ignited by some visitor's carelessness with matches, and he had to stay and help fight the blaze.

The fire burned with a great snapping and crackling of branches. Charles and the others snatched up the available tools—two spades, a rake, and a snow shovel—hoping to block the flames by digging a fire trench. They worked furiously, half blinded by smoke. The tourists gathered to watch. "You'd better send somebody to tell the fire department," one man suggested to Victor.

Many visitors had cameras and were busily filming the dramatic scene. A dead tree flared like a torch. It fell, hurling glowing brands. Lydia hurried around with a bucket of water, extinguishing them. "There are some over there," a woman told her, pointing to some blazing tufts of grass. The edge of Jane's long dress began smoldering. She had to rip off that part. Charles's cut was bleeding through the bandage. He felt faint and sick, and had to totter back from the heat.

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"Hold it," a man said to him, and snapped his picture in a close-up. The snack-stand woman was doing a brisk business, for the fire had stimulated appetites, particularly among the children.

When the breeze shifted, the fire stopped advancing, and slowly burned itself out. Victor asked some men to help carry buckets from the well to douse the embers, but by then it was quite late in the day and the guides were summoning everyone. "You kids deserve a big round of applause," one man said, and he would have shaken Victor's hand, if it hadn't been so grimy.

Lewis and Jane took Charles to the village to see the doctor. Late that night Lewis returned alone, explaining that Charles had been driven to the hospital in Utica for tests, and Jane had gone, too, to be with him. They wanted their things sent to Jane's family in Buffalo, for they had decided not to return to the farm.

"Not even if the tourists stop coming?" Victor asked.

"The tourists aren't going to stop coming," Lewis answered.

The next morning Victor noticed visitors picking up twigs and handfuls of grass and putting them in their pockets. "Why are you doing that?" he asked. A man answered that since there were no craft artifacts left to buy, he and his wife wanted something to take home as souvenirs. A young woman came up to Victor. "Let me pay you for these," she said, showing him some pebbles. He gazed at her, bemused. "No charge for pebbles," he said finally. The young woman looked distressed. "Oh, I wouldn't feel right, not paying," she said, but she kept the pebbles anyway.

Later Victor saw that people were taking pieces of rotted floor boarding from the cottage. He went over to stop them. "You need to get the bad part out," a man told him. "That way the air can get in and dry out the rest."

Lydia was dismantling her loom, and Lewis was packing his tools. "Stay a little longer," Victor urged them, but when they asked him why, he had no answer. From the east came the howl and rumble of the earthmovers and the trucks. Work on the swamp had begun. "We'll stay the night, anyway," said Lewis. "We'll leave tomorrow."

That afternoon Victor helped Lewis and Lydia load the cart, and push it into the village, as they wanted to put their possessions and those of Charles and Jane into the shop for safekeeping. On the main street they noticed two women wearing dresses like Lydia's—long skirts, large sleeves, and high collars. One woman

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was shielding her smiling face from the sun with a parasol. They asked about these costumes at the post office, and the postmistress, Mrs. Chadwick, said it was a new fashion from New York, quite the rage, despite the discomfort in summer. "They'll never get me in an outfit like that," said Mrs. Chadwick, but Lydia saw she now wore her hair, Nineties-style, in a chignon.

The young people brought back bottled water. The well was thick with refuse, and they were afraid to drink from it. They found people in the house. Victor asked them to leave. One man requested his autograph. "I'll never forget this wonderful place," the man said. He and the other visitors went across the lane to the cottage, and sat on the steps there, gazing back at the house.

Twilight came in through the ruined woods, turning everything a melancholy brown, like a faded photograph. Some tourists had gone; others remained. They were still there at dark. When Lewis brought the food out to the table on the porch, he could see dim figures standing in the lane, like the snowmen he and Charles had made in winter.

"Maybe we ought to eat inside," he said to Lydia, but she told him there were people in back, too, looking in that way. "What do they want?" she asked. "Why don't they go away?" Victor came out on the porch; he wouldn't eat. The distant earthmovers had fallen silent for the night, but from time to time the young people could hear a cracking sound from the cottage across the lane.

"There's a big hole in the floor now," Lewis said. "I went over an hour ago to look. They're breaking it up." Victor was walking restlessly about the porch. He stopped, and said, "They're not breaking it up. They're consuming it."

Visitors' cigarettes glowed like fireflies in the yard. The moonlight was reflected by white things; shirts swam in the darkness, and tennis shoes took steps. A chain of pale faces drifted in the lane, shifting and bobbing in a soft flow of talk. "Oh, why don't they go away?" Lydia said again. "What do they want?"

The young people remained on the porch all night, huddled together. The first light of day showed that the yard and lane were empty, and yet voices came from the pasture. New people were arriving. "They've never come this early," Victor said. From the east the earthmovers began pounding at the swamp. Dust clouds rolled up crimson in the sunrise.

"Let's go," Lewis said. Tourists were gathering in front of the house, smiling and pointing their cameras. Lewis took Lydia's

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arm; together they went down the steps and along the lane, trying not to notice the people around them. "Hi, there," a woman said. "I'm Myra Morton from Aurora. Is the museum open, or is it too early?"

Lewis kept going, guiding Lydia by the elbow. Someone asked for his autograph. Someone else snapped their photograph. "You got a swell place here," a man said enthusiastically. Near the barn Lewis turned to look for Victor and saw him well behind them, walking slowly, and glancing this way and that, as if unsure which way he ought to go. Lewis shouted back at him to hurry. Victor waved, but didn't quicken his pace. Halfway across the pasture, Lewis looked back again. There were many tourists walking across the trampled weeds, and he couldn't see past them. "We'll wait for Victor in the village," he told Lydia.

Victor's eyes smarted, and his head ached. A bitter odor still breathed out of the burnt woods, where charred trees were dying. He thought of returning to the house to take something with him—perhaps his violin, ruined though it was—but there were people touring the rooms, and he didn't want to have to push his way among them.

He was discouraged when he approached the pasture. There weren't just people there, but cars as well. Several were parked just beyond the barn. Others were bumping across the rough ground, following the jeep tracks. In the distance, just visible among the apple trees, was a tour bus, rocking and bucking along. Victor decided not to leave that way, and turned back along the lane.

As he passed the house, he saw a woman come out of the front doorway onto the porch. She was putting a plate into her purse. She saw him, and smiled vivaciously. "Hi there," she said. Farther on was the vegetable patch. A tourist had pulled up a carrot. He, too, noticed Victor, and grinned, and waved the carrot. "Where do I pay?" he asked. "In the house?"

Victor hurried along the lane. It was padded with the dead leaves of many years. Broken branches had fallen there, too. He had to pick his way carefully in places. The going became more difficult the farther he went. Only when he paused to disentangle his feet from some vines did he realize that there was a group of tourists behind him.

"Please don't follow me," he said, and his voice was uneven, for the exertion of his walk had brought his breath up quick. The

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tourists regarded him in a friendly way. "Hi there," one of the men said. "I'm Charley Farson from Binghamton, and this is my wife, Nella." His wife wiggled her fingers at Victor.

Victor swung around and continued to push his way through the undergrowth. He could tell by the voices that the tourists were still following him, but he didn't want to look at them again. The lane was completely overgrown. Brambles tore at his clothes and slashed at his hands. He heard the tourists exclaiming as they helped free each other from the thorns. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead; his palms were crisscrossed with little cuts.

The closer he got to the swamp, the louder grew the thunder of the earthmovers. The ground was no longer firm, but spongy. His feet sank in more with every step. He saw glints of water through the trees to his right, so he circled off the other way. The trees were dead there. They had been dead for years. It was a forest of dead trees and stumps and fallen logs that lay half submerged in the swamp.

The effort of pulling his feet from the clinging mire wearied Victor. He was sweating heavily, and gasping, and was half blinded by the perspiration mixed with blood that coursed down his forehead. The tourists were close behind him, conversing. He glanced back one last time. "Please don't follow me," he repeated. Some of them waved at him. One man had his camera out. "Watch the birdie," he said, and snapped Victor's picture.

Victor lumbered on in the mud. His feet thrust ankle-deep sometimes. Once he went to his knees, and had to crawl out. He was smeared with muck. He began running—a heavy, staggering run. His breath burst from him in sobs. He couldn't tell how far ahead of the tourists he was. His eyes smarted from the perspiration; he strained to see his way. The swamp-light was pale and greenish, shadowed by the dim slanting streaks of the dead trees. They were branchless, like torsos without arms.

Victor lurched against these naked trunks; they were light as cardboard, and went toppling slowly down with a soft sighing sound. Ahead he saw a light patch and thought it might be a path, and so, confused and exhausted, he went floundering into a softness that sucked at him and sank with him until he was waist-deep, while the people came up behind, remaining at a safe distance and watching with great interest as he struggled there, losing strength and sinking still. The man with the camera had just enough time to finish the exposures on the roll of film.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

FAN FARE: If you are battling the urge to buy a huge armload of books ranging broadly in style and purpose and subject, but have neither shelf space nor funds, the problem can be reconciled by acquiring a copy of Jon Truska's *The Detective in Hollywood* (Doubleday, $14.95). Very large, very handsome, well illustrated, and jammed full of fascinating information, it is an excellent reference book. It is also one of the best browsing books of the year. It is also, alas, a compendium of gossipy chit-chat. If you have a burning desire to know that the author lit a cigarette for Lizabeth Scott during their interview, if you are dying to know the colors of her newly decorated apartment, if you are moved to know that he pulled the chair out for Miss Scott as she prepared to sit, you will be satisfied. The informal telling of behind-the-scenes stories is amusing and lots of fun, but the author's personal approach to the narrative is inappropriate. Despite its flaws and unreliability (when so many factual errors cohabit with new or little-known material one becomes wary of *all* the research), this is a monumental tome which joins the handful of indispensable books for a mystery reference shelf.

FANNING OUT: Remember when school was hard work and struggling through the classics (a definition of a "classic": a book people used to read) which, for all their longevity and durability, were sometimes rough going? Academia has graduated to a more pleasant level. During the past decade, literally hundreds of courses in mystery fiction have been offered in the nation's colleges and universities, helping students to increase their enjoyment of this honorable literary form while providing them with insight into its artistic and cultural significance. As with most important fields of study, mystery fiction has taken its next logical step: it is now offered as a correspondence course by the University of California at Berkeley.

One may be either a non-credit student or earn five quarter-sys-

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em units of upper-division credit n English. Taught by Professor lliot L. Gilbert of the University f California at Davis, the course ncompasses the major schools f detective fiction from Edgar llan Poe and Charles Dickens rough Sherlock Holmes and ashiell Hammett up to Ross Maconald and Lew Archer. Among ne course materials provided are our novels, *The World of Mystery iction* (a large anthology comiled by Professor Gilbert) and a assette-tape interview featuring llery Queen.

The registration fee for all stuents is $98.00, which includes aterials, instructions, personal omments, and guidance. For rther information and enrollent forms, write to Independent tudy, Dept. CP-6, University of alifornia Extension, 2223 Fulton treet, Berkeley, CA 94720. Or elephone (415) 642-7268.

FAN-ZINE: A little magazine circulation: approximately 150) evoted to the world of mystery as been struggling along for a w years but has at last settled own. *The MYSTERY FANcier,* dited and published by Guy M. ownsend, underwent numerous anges of format, address, price, nd even printing process before ettling on its present style. It is nsophisticated, its many articles nd literally dozens of reviews ach issue being more genial and fectionate than scholarly, and ou cannot help but enjoy it. Perps the best part of each issue Townsend's own exhaustive study of the Nero Wolfe saga, which has been serialized in the past eight issues, with many, many issues and installments to come. The journal is written by and for fans of the genre, and is worth the attention of all those who number themselves among that coterie. A subscription is $9.00 per year (six issues); checks and correspondence should be addressed to Mr. Townsend at 1120 Bluebird Lane, Memphis, TN 38116. For completists, back issues are available.

RANDOM FANDOM: Robert L. Fish's new mystery, to be published in a few weeks by Doubleday, is his longest and quite probably best novel yet. Stanley Ellin has finished a private eye novel—his first of that type in many years. Ross Macdonald stopped work on his Lew Archer novel to write the screenplay of another Archer book. Richard Levinson and William Link, creators of television's *Columbo,* recently considered writing a script about Mrs. Columbo, the police lieutenant's unseen wife, but decided instead to do a blockbuster adventure movie starring Steve McQueen. When snags developed in the filming of Harlan Ellison's Edgar-winning short story, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs," he accepted one of the most ambitious motion-picture projects of all time: writing the screenplay for Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot.* Agatha Christie is the big name involved in a book this year. Unlike past years, when she wrote them,

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she is the featured character in Kathleen Tynan's *Agatha* (Ballantine's first hardcover book), which provides an admittedly (and obviously) fictional account of the famous eleven-day disappearance. Gregg Press, a small-to-medium-sized Boston publisher, has announced its intention to begin a series of hardcover reprints of important mystery fiction. The mystery world mourns the death of A. S. Burack, editor and publisher of *The Writer* magazine. Virtually every major mystery writer and editor of the past forty years contributed to the magazine or the books he published.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Like the dark carnivals and demonic spook rides of our childhood, today's giant amusement-theme parks (at which, according to a recent study by the University of Pennsylvania, 170 million visitors spend more than $900 million dollars yearly) reach out for visions of mystery to provide the proper thrills. The twin colossi, Disneyland/Disney World, have gone to extraordinary lengths to create a Haunted House through which a host of the most genuine-appearing transparent wraiths flit and moan—achieved by front-projecting "ghosts" against invisible glass screens so that the visitor can see the backgrounds through them—and a high-spirited, blood-thirsty Pirates-of-the-Caribbean boatride which passes realistic automated tableaux of rapage ashore and crime on the high seas. The rides are nearly identical at both Disneyland at Anaheim and Disney World at Orlando, but the Florida complex, built after the California success, shaves both attractions slightly in order to move the crowds through faster. So head west.

Also in Southern California, and much less automated than Disney's mechanical marvels, are the sprawling historical recreations of Knott's Berry Farm, through which one can tread through a Ghost Town and Haunted Mine with their shivery somber legends of real outlaws and long-ago vengeance. Actual turn-of-the-century-melodrama stage plays are presented nightly as well, charmingly nostalgic of the blood-and-thunder epics (*stolen fortunes! vanished heirs! stained honor! murder at the railroad crossing!*) with which touring companies once thrilled the small-town opera houses of a now lost America.

Theme parks devoted *exclusively* to the mystery genre are yet ahead of us, but are spearheaded by such attractions as the

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Haunted Mansion newly opened at Long Branch, New Jersey—a huge, grim, Gothic structure through which frightened visitors walk seemingly endless corridors (actually three full levels of circular, mazelike ramps) assaulted by scenes of terror from Poe to *Psycho,* scurrying through rooms that are by turn such real-looking mystery settings as crypts, cells, chapels, laboratories, sinister nurseries, a dark forest, a graveyard, a swamp, a rat cave, a cobblestoned Whitechapel street and more. Moving with you through the darkness is a troupe of over thirty young actors portraying gypsies, cowled monks, lycanthropes, maniacs, and historical personages from Lizzie Borden to Jack the Ripper, all contributing (along with a superb multi-track sound system of eerie music and the myriad noises of the night) to the total thrill. "Fear is a natural high," says magician Bob Dorian, who helped design the dazzling audio and visual effects of the Mansion, and one is certainly caught up in the goosefleshy fun of these corridors of terror, filled with happy screams, where surely every day is Hallowe'en.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

This column has never spent a great deal of space telling what is wrong with a particular novel, and this is as it should be. In a limited space, it is surely more important to praise what is good than to lambaste what is not so good. But one recent mystery illustrates so well an unfortunate by-product of the long-hoped-for merging of "mainstream" and "category" fiction that it deserves special attention.

I remember seeing a segment of the TV series *The Bionic Woman* a few years ago. It had a typical comicbook plot, wild and incredible, but, if handled right, fun. Instead of approaching it in the fast-paced B-movie style that seemed appropriate, the director chose to treat it as if it were the latest Ingmar Bergman film, full of long lingering atmosphere shots and slow motion. Needless to say, the result was ludicrous. Something similar happens on a literary level in Francis John Thornton's *The Snake Harvest* (Coward, McCann, Geoghegan, $9.95), a novel set in 1898 Philadelphia and involving the hunt for a Ripperlike serial killer of women, known as the Butcher.

The plot is strictly Sax Rohmer stuff: supersleuth *vs.* master criminal with a motivation for the latter that is pure science fiction (comic strip, not *Analog*-type). If Thornton had chosen to write it in the manner of Sax Rohmer, that would be fine, but instead he

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writes at a molasses-slow pace, introduces a large cast of characters, and departs on frequent historical tangents about the Spanish-American War. The historical sidebars are okay. The characters are okay, possibly excepting the dialect comedians. The leisurely pace is even okay, as is the crazy thriller plot. They simply don't belong in the same book. Style and content have to go together. If Ian Fleming's James Bond novels had been written in the dense, difficult style of William Faulkner, they would have turned off fans of Faulkner and Fleming equally.

Thornton's novel has much in it that is good. But with a more realistic plot or a less pretentious framework, it could have been much better.

*** Celia Fremlin: *The Spider-Orchid,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. Seldom have I read a more blatant example of over-informative publisher's copy as on the jacket of this novel. Truthfully, though, even knowing too much should not spoil anyone's pleasure in the author's latest domestic suspense novel—she writes too well, infuses her characters with too much life, observes their problems with too much sympathy and humor. And her best secrets are kept even by the blurb-writer.

*** Rex Burns: *Speak for the Dead,* Harper and Row, $8.95. A young woman's head, found in the Denver Botanical Garden conservatory, starts Gabe Wager on his third recorded case, a solid and entertaining one. Wager's move from narcotics to homicide is a welcome one, because murder is a far more interesting crime than drug trafficking.

*** David Linzee: *Discretion,* Seaview Books, $8.95. Sarah Saber and Chris Rockwell, two young investigators for an ultra-modern private-detective firm called Inquiries, Inc. (or Inkwink to the irreverent), find themselves unknowingly on opposite sides in an involved and ingenious plot involving Italian art theft. Linzee whose greatest strength may be his realistically romantic touch with male-female relationships has written a worthy successor to his outstanding debut, *Death in Connecticut.*

*** Jack S. Scott: *The Shallow Grave,* Harper and Row, $7.95 This English village mystery sans coziness is a good example of the anti-detective story, wherein the lack of a neat resolution reverberates after the book is closed. Strong on character and dark humor, Scott is a stylist to watch.

*** Hartshorne: *The Mexican Assassin,* Scribners, $8.95. This expert espionage novel (James Bond-Matt Helm type) has plenty of humor, romance, action, suspense, dirty tricks, and endless complications. It feels like the work of an old pro. (The rear jacket flap says, "Hartshorne who must otherwise remain unidentified, has held a senior intelligence post." A few years ago that kind of author note usually

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meant that E. Howard Hunt was the man behind the pseudonym. Perhaps it still does.)

** Michael Underwood: *Crooked Wood,* St. Martin's, $7.95. The latest adventure of Clare and Nick Atwell has its moments but falls short of their best—the courtroom action is less exciting than usual, the puzzle less enthralling.

** Jonathan Fast: *Mortal Gods,* Harper and Row, $8.95. Set in the year 2226 and involving some frightening projections of the effects of genetic engineering, this sf-mystery hybrid will be remembered longest for the victims, godlike superhumans called Lifestylers. Though occasionally preachy, heavy-handedly satirical, and surprisingly sexist, the novel provides an enthralling lightweight whodunit and an old-fashioned human-alien love story. (Fast is a sf writer with roots in the mystery field—his father Howard writes suspense novels as E. V. Cunningham, and his uncle Julius was an Edgar-winning first novelist long before his best-sellerdom as an interpreter of body language.)

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"Q"

CRIME RHYME

by John H. Dromey

Chemical quickdraw: Mace race.
Comical con man: gangster prankster.
Counterfeit bills with the ink still wet: runny funny money.
Cracking an empty safe: filch zilch.
Fingerprint powder: bust dust.
Keeping out the teargas: mask task.
Narc squad search: dope grope.
Picking an empty pocket: dip slip.
Prison diary: jail tale.
Prison toilet: can can.
Reluctant witness: balkie talkie.
Riot helmet: cop top.
Select a Santa's helper from the line-up: pick Nick.
Smuggler's hollow heel: loot boot.
Unsigned confession: 'fess up mess up.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

ELLERY QUEEN'S NAPOLEONS OF MYSTERY, edited by Ellery Queen. The Dial Press, $8.95.

Professor Moriarty was once described by Sherlock Holmes as "the Napoleon of Crime." Ellery Queen uses a similar expression—"the Napoleons of Mystery"—to describe the great detectives and mystery writers appearing in his latest anthology.

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, Isaac Asimov's Henry, Edward D. Hoch's Captain Leopold, Michael Gilbert's Inspector Petrella, Michael Innes' Sir John Appleby, Phyllis Bentley's Miss Phipps, Ellery Queen's EQ, and others are collected here from the best short stories, novelets and short novels published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*

THE MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF DEVLIN, by William M. Green. Bobbs-Merrill Co., $8.95.

Devlin is a soldier of fortune. He is ruthless; he is cold-bloodedly efficient on all of his "jobs." He is the ideal man to be hired by Petrolux Oil, a multibillion-dollar complex. Petrolux owns the island of Dhasai. Located in the Persian Gulf, the island contains hundreds of oil-storage tanks used by major oil-producing countries in the Near East. A group of terrorists have taken over the island, and Petrolux wants Devlin to infiltrate the group and destroy them, and then release five hundred hostages. Devlin wages a guerilla war against the terrorists but at a tragically high price.

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNTED PRICE
Burns, Rex	SPEAK FOR THE DEAD	Harper & Row	$8.95	$6.95
Drummond, Ivor	A STENCH OF POPPIES	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Fast, Jonathan	MORTAL GODS	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Fremlin, Celia	THE SPIDER-ORCHID	Doubleday—Crime Club	7.95	6.35
Green, William M.	THE MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF DEVLIN	Bobbs-Merrill Co.	8.95	6.95
Hartshorne	THE MEXICAN ASSASSIN	Scribners	8.95	6.95
Jeffers, H. Paul	THE ADVENTURE OF THE STALWART COMPANIONS	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Kemelman, Harry	THURSDAY THE RABBI WALKED OUT	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Lathen, Emma	DOUBLE, DOUBLE, OIL AND TROUBLE	Simon & Schuster	7.95	6.35
MacDonald, John D.	THE EMPTY COPPER SEA	Lippincott	8.95	6.95
Michaels, Barbara	WAIT FOR WHAT WILL COME	Dodd, Mead & Co.	8.95	6.95
Parker, Robert B.	THE JUDAS GOAT	Houghton Mifflin	7.95	6.35
Pentecost, Hugh	DEADLY TRAP	Dodd, Mead & Co.	6.95	5.50
Pronzini, Bill & Colin Wilcox	TWOSPOT	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Queen, Ellery (ed.)	ELLERY QUEEN'S NAPOLEONS OF MYSTERY	Dial Press	8.95	6.95
Scott, Jack S.	THE SHALLOW GRAVE	Harper & Row	7.95	6.35
Thornton, Francis John	THE SNAKE HARVEST	Coward, McCann, Geoghegan	9.95	7.95
Underwood, Michael	CROOKED WOOD	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35

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a *NEW* Inspector Dover story by

JOYCE PORTER

Sherlock Holmes often reminded Dr. Watson: "You know my methods." Well, Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover of Scotland Yard has his methods too. Unorthodox, true, and Sherlock Holmes would never have approved of them—but they get the job done. The grumbling, but not bumbling, Dover, the growling, scowling, sneering, snorting Dover, faced with the murder of an "obscure superannuated copper," an ex-Metropolitan policeman, avenges the honor and restores the reputation of the Force—in his own fashion . . .

DOVER WITHOUT PERKS

by JOYCE PORTER

"And this is where the body was found, sir."

Detective Chief Inspector Dover, having with difficulty been induced to leave the shelter of the police car, stood shivering inside his overcoat. He tossed an indifferent glance at the site before transferring his disgruntled gaze to his surroundings.

'Strewth, what a dump! Like the back of the bloody moon!

He was standing on a short stretch of access road which led from the busy dual carriage-way on his left to a new housing development, just beginning to spread its unloveliness over the hillside, on his right. From this distance the development was a jumble of unmade roads, scaffolding, patches of raw earth, and a few demoralized houses poking up like sore thumbs into the cold sky. Beyond, as far as the eye could see, lay acres of deserted, frost-bitten fields with only the occasional wind-swept hedge to break the monotony.

Such desolation made it all the more surprising that the access road proudly sported a brand-new pedestrian crossing, complete

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with black and white stripes and flashing orange beacons. It was here, some 50 yards before the access road swung round to glide into the dual carriage-way, that the dead man had been found at 5:25 that morning.

"Funnily enough, sir, it was his son-in-law who found him. He's a milk roundsman and he was cycling down to his depot. It was still dark then, of course, but he spotted the old chap in the light of the beacon." Even Inspector York, the local man who was doing the honors, was stamping his feet to warm them.

But Dover, who had been transported from London to the scene of the crime with what he considered unseemly haste, still hadn't got his bearings. "Where the hell are we?" he demanded crossly while his young, handsome, and long-suffering assistant, Detective Sergeant MacGregor, turned aside to hide his blushing.

Inspector York was a little disconcerted, too. It was his first encounter with Scotland Yard's famous Murder Squad and he didn't know quite what to make of it. Surely they couldn't all be like this? "Well, this is Willow Hill Farm Housing Estate, actually, sir," he said, indicating the miserable clutch of dwellings on the hillside. "Part of Bridchurch's slum-clearance scheme. Bridchurch is where you got off the train, sir. It's three miles away." He pointed down the dual carriage-way. "Some day, sir"—this time he made a generous, encircling gesture—"all this will be covered with houses. Meantime, it's all a bit isolated. Still, that should make our job a bit easier, shouldn't it, sir?"

Dover's response might have been a belch or it might have been an encouraging grunt.

Naively Inspector York plumped for the encouraging grunt. "There are not likely to be many people knocking about round here on a dark November night," he explained earnestly. "We've been working on the hypothesis that the murderer has some connection with the housing estate. In fact, he probably lives there. We found a lump of dried mud not far from the body and it probably came off the car that hit him. Now, we're pretty certain that the mud came from the housing estate—it's a proper quagmire when it rains, as you can imagine. It hasn't, however, rained for a fortnight. Well, if our chappie was on the estate a fortnight ago, the odds are that he lives there. Or, at the very worst, he's a frequent visitor."

Dover's habitual scowl deepened appreciably. "If it's a local case, why the hell fetch us into it?"

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Inspector York quailed before such naked fury. "Our Chief Constable thought the Yard would want to handle it themselves, sir, since the dead man was one of yours."

"One of ours?"

"Malcolm Bailey, sir. He was an ex-Metropolitan policeman. We thought there might be—well—ramifications."

"Ramifications? Was he Special Branch or what?"

"No, sir." Inspector York wished the Chief Constable was there to do his own dirty work. "His last job before retirement was court usher at Ealing actually. Since then he's had fifteen years with the Corps of Commissionaires in the West End. He was a Londoner, you see. Nothing to do with Bridchurch at all."

But Dover's butterfly mind had already moved on to weightier problems. The murder of obscure superannuated coppers could wait. "Here," he said, trying to disappear into the depths of his overcoat, "where've you set up the Murder Headquarters? I'm getting bloody frozen out here. Got us a nice cosy pub, have you?"

To date, unfortunately, there were no pubs on the Willow Hill Farm Estate. Nor were there any shops, cinemas, or other amenities.

"We were going to use a caravan, sir, but it hasn't arrived yet. I've been trying to chase it up but—"

But Dover was already stumping back to the comparative warmth and shelter of the police car. After a moment's hesitation MacGregor and Inspector York followed him.

Once they were all in the car, MacGregor took charge of things since Dover appeared to have lost all interest and was sitting slumped in a corner with his bowler hat pulled well down over his eyes. If it hadn't been completely unthinkable, Inspector York might have been tempted to conclude that old Mastermind was having a bit of a snooze.

"If Bailey was a Londoner," said MacGregor, resting his notebook awkwardly on his knees, "what was he doing down here?"

"He'd come for a few days' holiday with his daughter. He only arrived yesterday."

"That's the daughter who's married to the milkman who found the body?"

"Yes. They're named Muldoon. Apparently, last night, the dead man decided to go out for a drink. Like I said, there aren't any pubs on the Estate, so he had to catch a bus out there on the

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main road and go into Bridchurch."

"The Muldoons didn't go with him?"

"No. They don't go out much at night in the middle of the week because of him having to be up so early in the morning."

MacGregor pondered. "The Muldoons didn't raise the alarm when Bailey failed to return home at a reasonable hour?"

"They didn't know. It's this milk business again. Both Muldoon and his wife go to bed early, about half-past nine, they say. Last night they simply gave Bailey a key and told him to let himself in when he got back. They'd no idea, they claim, that he wasn't fast asleep in the spare room until Muldoon himself practically fell over the dead body on the pedestrian crossing."

Dover, roused by a crick in the back of his neck, joined in the conversation. "Damned fool place to stick a zebra crossing," he grumbled, massaging the offending spot. "Right out here in the back of beyond."

Inspector York risked a placatory smile. "It's supposed to be a mistake on the part of the Highways Department, sir. It should have been erected on another housing development on the other side of town."

" 'Strewth!" said Dover and surrendered himself once more to torpidity.

Inspector York, a novice at Dover-watching, waited to see if any more pearls of wisdom were going to drop from beneath that motheaten little black mustache, but luckily MacGregor knew a snore when he heard one.

"What about the medical evidence? Have we got a time of death yet?"

Inspector York dragged his eyes away. "Er—oh, yes, sorry, Sergeant! Time of death? About eleven last night. That fits with the supposition that Bailey would be on the last bus from Bridchurch which would drop him out there on the main road just before eleven. He wouldn't hang about on such a cold night and I reckon he simply walked from the bus stop to where he was found and was killed there. He wasn't robbed, by the way."

"And the cause of death?"

"Head bashed in with a blunt instrument. However"—Inspector York leaned forward so as to deliver his *bonne bouche* with maximum effect—"before that he'd been knocked down by a car. The doctor's absolutely sure about it. Bailey was severely bruised all down the left side, though it's unlikely the car was damaged.

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Still, you see what it means, Sergeant?"

"Oh, I think so," said MacGregor with a patronizing smile, the local bobby not having yet been born who could catch him napping. "It means that Bailey was probably knocked down by a car which was coming *from* the housing estate." He flapped a languid hand. "If Bailey got off the bus at that stop, he'd walk down there and cross this road here at the crossing with his left-hand side towards the housing estate. Interesting."

Inspector York suppressed an unworthy longing to sink his fist up to the wrist in a certain smug young face, then reminded himself that it was his job to be helpful. He got a couple of sheets of paper out of his pocket. "Luckily," he said, "there aren't many people on the estate who can afford to run a car these days. It takes some of 'em all they can manage to pay the bus fares. Anyhow"—he passed one sheet of paper over—"there's a list of those who have got cars. And here"—he held out the second sheet—"is a real bonus!"

"You don't say!"

Inspector York gritted his teeth. Much more of this and he'd leave the pair of 'em to stew in their own juice! "It's the name and address of an old lady who may narrow the field down even further. My lads had a chat with her earlier on and she seems bright enough. However, she's no chicken, so you'll have to use your own judgment."

"Your lads seem to have been very busy," said MacGregor as he accepted the second sheet.

Inspector York let some of the bitterness show through. "My lads," he muttered angrily, "could have had this case tied up a couple of hours ago if they hadn't been told to hang back and wait for you lot."

Mrs. Alice Golightly was 84 years old and still fighting back in spite of the fact that she had been sentenced to virtual solitary confinement by a caring community. The sheltered housing, into which she had been moved, was miles away from all her friends and relations and consisted of a drab row of two-roomed units built halfway up a steepish hill and fronting onto a block of communal garages.

"Bloody motor cars!" quavered Mrs. Golightly. "I'd ban 'em if I was prime minister, straight I would." She leaned across and gave Dover a poke in the paunch to gain his attention. "Nasty stinking things! They're more bloomin' bother than they're worth."

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MacGregor smiled a kindly smile.

Mrs. Golightly leered back. It had been a long time since she'd had two fine chaps like this hanging on her every word. "There's that young punk up at the back," she went on. "You know—What's-his-name." She rummaged around in her memory. "Miller—that's him! Woke me up at ten past seven this morning trying to start his car—grind, grind, grind! Well, that meant I had to go to the toilet, didn't it? I'd hardly got sat down when—damn me!—he finally gets it going and all these stinking, smelly petrol fumes come pouring in through the bathroom window where there's gaps you could drive a corporation bus through. It's a public scandal! There isn't a bloody window in this whole bloody row that fits proper."

Dover roused himself to recall his hostess to a sense of what was fitting and proper. "Don't you," he bellowed at her, "usually have a cup of coffee about this time, missus? And a butt and a few biscuits?"

Mrs. Golightly was not amused and MacGregor rushed in before she could start expressing her opinion of those who attempted to sponge on old-age pensioners. "Er—does this Mr. Miller often wake you up starting his car?"

"He'd better not! Next time I'll have the law on him. Bloody motor cars!" She looked up. "I remember when it was all horses," she boasted. "Not but what they hadn't got some disgusting habits, but at least they didn't go messing your telly up!"

"Ah," said MacGregor with heaven-sent inspiration, "your television, Mrs. Golightly! Is that how you know when the cars use the garages opposite?"

Mrs. Golightly nodded grimly. "They break my picture up something cruel," she grumbled. "Every last one of 'em! And don't talk to me about suppressors! They've all had 'em fitted and it doesn't make a ha'porth of difference. I've had them Post Office engineers round here," she went on savagely. "Endless. Nothing but kids, most of 'em, and about as much use as my old boot. I have to keep a bloody record for 'em now, you know." She snatched a small writing pad off the table and waved it contemptuously. "Like I told her from the Welfare—it's coming to something when a lady's word isn't good enough!"

MacGregor tried to unravel things, just in case Dover was still listening. "You keep a note of every time there's interference with your television picture," he said, "and that means every time

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a car enters or leaves those garages opposite."

Mrs. Golightly's sniff acknowledged that this was so.

"And you watch television all evening?"

"I watch it all day," came the forthright answer. "And so will you when you're my age, sonny! I'd have it on now if you lot weren't here putting me through the third degree."

"And last night?"

"None of them cars went in or out after six o'clock. Well, they never do on a Thursday, do they?"

"Don't they?"

"Everybody's skint on a Thursday." Mrs. Golightly appreciated a bit of company but you could have too much of a good thing. "Friday's payday. Nobody's got any money left to go gallivanting on a Thursday. I should have thought even you'd know that."

Dover heaved himself to his feet. Although, to the untutored eye, his role in the interview may have appeared completely passive, some information had evidently filtered through. "I'll just go and have a look at that toilet," he said.

MacGregor tried to pass the time in small talk, but Mrs. Golightly's aged ears didn't miss a thing. Eventually she raised her voice over the sound of rushing water. "That fellow who's been killed—"

"Malcolm Bailey?" asked MacGregor.

"I saw him when he arrived," said Mrs. Golightly. "A fine figure of a man." She paused spitefully to underline her point. "What I call a *real* policeman!"

So, if old Mrs. Golightly's evidence was to be believed, none of the cars habitually kept in the block of garages could have been involved in the murder.

"And that, actually, sir, leaves us with only three suspects." MacGregor gazed unhappily around at the wilderness of builders' rubbish and half-finished houses. "The people who own cars but who leave them parked out on the road. Always assuming, of course, that Bailey was killed by whoever knocked him down. I wonder what the motive was. It can't be anything to do with his past life, surely? He's been retired for ages and he doesn't seem to have been exactly a ball of fire when he was in the Force. On the other hand, he's hardly been down here long enough to make enemies. Less than twenty-four hours and this was his first visit." MacGregor sighed. "I think we'll have to have a good long look at this daughter and her husband."

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Dover was not the man for idle speculation. "For God's sake, let's get out of this bloody wind!" he growled. "It's enough to freeze a brass monkey!"

MacGregor, being MacGregor, knew where he was going. "Azalea Crescent, sir," he said as he led the way into a slightly curving, potholed stretch of road. "Mr. Jarrow lives here. And that, I imagine, is his car." Ever mindful that Dover's eyesight was something less than keen, MacGregor indicated an enormous black Humber parked by the curb and sparkling magnificently in the pale sunlight.

Sparkling?

"*Stop that*!" MacGregor leaped forward and screamed like a banshee.

The man with the soft duster jumped back as though stung. "Eh?"

"You're destroying evidence!"

"What?"

"Didn't the police tell you we might want to examine that car?"

The unfortunate perfectionist shook his head. "A couple of 'em had a good look at it earlier on," he said lamely.

"Didn't they tell you not to touch it?"

Bill Jarrow gesticulated feebly with his duster. "I was just passing the time, like."

It was Dover—he of the aching feet and the rumbling stomach—who moved the proceedings indoors. Bill Jarrow put his duster away and called to his wife to put the coffee on. He thus insured that, unless the evidence was *very* strong to the contrary, he'd be able to get away with murder where Dover was concerned. He further endeared himself by keeping his answers short and to the point, seemingly knowing by instinct that Dover valued brevity well above truthfulness.

Mr. Jarrow proved to be a taxi driver and the car he had been polishing belonged to the company for whom he worked. Most weekday evenings, when business was slack, he was allowed to bring the car home with him and answer any calls from his house. "It saves 'em keeping the office open," he explained.

"Did you get called out last night?"

"No. Me and the missus sat watching telly till it was time for bed."

"So your wife is the only witness?"

Bill Jarrow didn't seem unduly perturbed that his alibi was

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being questioned. "You can check the mileage, if you like. They'll have a note at the office of what it was yesterday evening when I left. You can soon see if it doesn't tally."

Since Dover had got his National Health Service dentures inextricably sunk in Mrs. Jarrow's homemade treacle cake, MacGregor carried on with the questioning. "There's no meter on the taxi?"

"Not this one. We use this one for funerals, you see," said Mr. Jarrow, passing Dover's cup through the kitchen hatch for a refill. "Folk don't like to see a meter clicking away when they're following their loved ones to the crematorium."

MacGregor examined Bill Jarrow thoughtfully. "Anything to stop you getting a call, doing the job, altering the mileage reading, and pocketing the fare?" he asked pleasantly.

For the first time Mr. Jarrow's occupational antipathy to the police showed through. "Trust you bloody cops!" he said disgustedly. "Look, mate, I've been a taxi driver for twenty years. I wouldn't last five minutes if I started pulling tricks like that. What do you think my boss is, stupid or something? Petrol consumption alone'd be a dead giveaway. And suppose I had a smashup? Or somebody saw me?"

Bill Jarrow continued to wax indignant for some time but, eventually, he recovered his equilibrium sufficiently to direct MacGregor to Japonica Mount, their next port of call. It was so close at hand that even Dover didn't think it was worth demanding a police car.

"That chap might have run us there in his taxi," Dover observed sourly as he and MacGregor proceeded slowly on their way back past Mrs. Golightly's humble abode, "if you hadn't been so bloody rude to him. What got into you? Any fool could see he's too thick to be anything but honest."

MacGregor didn't agree. "You don't need much intelligence, sir, to alter a mileage reading. And he was giving that car a thorough cleaning. He could have been removing traces of incriminating evidence."

"Stuff!" puffed Dover, already finding the going hard. "Besides, where's the motive? He'd never even met What's-his-name."

"Bailey, sir." MacGregor was well used to Dover's inability to remember any name (including probably his own) for more than five minutes. "Besides, I don't think we're looking for that kind of motive."

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"Oh, don't you?" sneered Dover in a poor imitation of MacGregor's refined accent. "Well, what kind of motive are we looking for, Smartie-boots?"

"I think the murder is tied up with the car accident, sir."

Dover paused to contemplate the young mountain which had suddenly loomed up in front of them. 'Strewth, if he'd realized that the "couple of hundred yards" was going to be straight up . . . "Of course it's tied up with the car accident," he growled, once he'd got his breath back. "The killer runs Whatd'yecall'im down and immobilizes him, and then gets out to finish him off with a tire lever or something. Gangsters in America are doing it all the time."

"It'll be just by that small red car, sir," said MacGregor, cringing away as Dover grabbed his arm and hung on. As a 240-pound weakling, the Chief Inspector wasn't fussy about who shared the burden. "I was thinking of a slight variation, actually," MacGregor went on, failing to appreciate that aching feet were now looming larger in Dover's mind than violent death. "I was wondering if the murder had to be committed *because* of the accident. That would fit Jarrow, you see. Suppose he had been doing a job without his employer's knowledge, and during the course of it accidentally knocks Mr. Bailey down. Well, to report the accident in the normal way would expose what he'd been doing and he'd get the sack. So"—even MacGregor was beginning to sound unconvinced—"he finishes Bailey off. I admit it sounds a bit thin, sir, but"—MacGregor cheered up—"plenty of murders have been done for less."

"This it?"

They had climbed almost to the top of the steep incline that was Japonica Mount and were now level with the small red car. According to its number plate it was 14 years old and it was obvious why its owner wasn't paying out good money to rent a garage for it.

Dover turned thankfully through the little wrought-iron gate and waddled up the path. The curtains in the front room had twitched but he stuck his finger in the bell-push and rested his weight on it.

A woman opened the door and Dover was halfway inside before he discovered, to his undisguised chagrin, that it was the wrong house.

"No," said the woman, "I'm Mrs. Jedryschowski. The Millers

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live the next house down." She moved forward fractionally and pointed.

Dover's fury mounted as he realized that the Miller house was one they had already passed.

"You'll not find her there, of course," said Mrs. Jedryschowski, "but he's in. The police turned him back when he was going to work."

Dover wasn't prepared to let the matter rest there. It was MacGregor's fault for dragging him to the wrong address, of course, but this Mrs. Whatever-her-name-was must take some of the blame. "That his car?" he demanded, with menace.

"Mr. Miller's?" Mrs. Jedryschowski eyed Dover with some suspicion. "Yes, it's his car."

"Then why is it parked outside your house?"

Not for the first time MacGregor marveled at Dover's unerring ability to grasp at the inessential.

It was all one to Mrs. Jedryschowski, of course. "You might well ask," she said, leaning forward to stare at the vehicle in question. "He always leaves it there. We have spoken to him about it but it made no difference. He says it's something to do with saving his battery."

MacGregor, of course, understood perfectly. "Oh, you mean he starts it by letting it run down the hill."

Mrs. Jedryschowski, something of an ignoramus where the internal combustion engine was concerned, nodded. "Something like that. If he leaves it outside his own front door, he doesn't get a long enough run or something." She watched her visitors go back halfway down the path before closing the door on them.

Henry Miller was a livelier character than his next-door neighbor, though not by much. He welcomed Dover and MacGregor into a house that was clearly lacking a woman's touch. Dover realized there was a fat chance of being offered any decent light refreshments here. He shoved a bundle of old socks out of the most comfortable-looking armchair and flopped down. This was going to be a bloody short interview.

Mr. Miller cleared a couple of dirty plates off another chair for MacGregor. "Bit of a mess," he mumbled in apology. "What with the wife being away—"

"Not ill, I hope?" asked MacGregor politely as he got his notebook out.

"Not exactly." Mr. Miller perched himself on the arm of the set-

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tee and looked hunted. Like everybody else on the housing estate, he knew all about the murder. He didn't, however, know Mr. Bailey or his daughter and her husband. "People keep themselves to themselves round here," he explained. "We don't want to impose. And this time of year you don't want to leave your own fireside, do you?"

Mr. Miller paused in the hope that somebody else might like to say something, but they didn't. "I work as a groundsman," he volunteered. "At Bridchurch Central Junior School. The police stopped me when I was driving off to work this morning and said I was to stay at home till somebody came and took a statement off me or something. They had a look at my car, too."

There was another pause. Mr. Miller mopped his brow. This time, however, MacGregor took pity on him and tossed a question.

Mr. Miller was grateful but unhelpful. "No, I didn't. I got back from work about four o'clock and I didn't leave the house again till this morning."

Even MacGregor was obliged to swallow a yawn. Dover, of course, wasn't even pretending to listen and was now resting his eyes against the light.

"You're alone in the house?"

Mr. Miller blinked. "Yes. With the wife being away like."

MacGregor looked at the layer of burnt crumbs which covered one corner of the table. "Has she been away long, sir?"

Mr. Miller sighed. "Only three days. I'm afraid I've been letting the housework slip a bit."

Having been given MacGregor's solemn word that the home of the last car owner could be reached in three minutes and that it was downhill all the way, Dover reluctantly consented to walk.

Since it really was downhill, the Great Detective had breath to spare for an in-depth discussion of the case so far. "That milksop?" he questioned incredulously. "You must have lost your marbles! He couldn't say boo to a goose!"

"He hasn't got an alibi, sir."

"Innocent people never have alibis," retorted Dover, generously imparting the fruits of his many years of experience. "Besides, where's his motive? What's-his-name could hardly get *him* into trouble for driving his own blooming car."

"Miller might have come up against Bailey in a professional capacity, sir. Bailey might have nabbed him for something and this is a revenge killing."

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"A revenge killing?" Dover's uninhibited hoot of mirth sent the seagulls winging up from a nearby field. " 'Strewth, you've been at those detective-story books again! Revenge—on a clapped-out copper from Ealing who's been retired for twenty years?" Dover, seeing that MacGregor was about to correct his figures, rushed raucously on. "That Miller pouf would still have been in his cradle when Who's-your-father was pounding the beat."

MacGregor quietly resolved to check whether Miller had a police record and if there was any possible earlier connection between him and the deceased. "Ah, here we are, sir."

They had just turned into Viburnam Avenue and the car this time was a huge and very ancient Ford, liberally decorated with anarchistic slogans, Mickey Mouse stickers, pictures of nude ladies, and rust. Inside the appropriate house they found the owner of this vehicle—Lionel Hutchinson. He was a moronic-looking, slack-mouthed teenager, the epitome of a petty, unsuccessful crook. Lionel's mother, having let Dover and MacGregor into the house while her ewe-lamb remained lolling full-length on the sofa, returned wearily to her ironing.

Young Lionel was uncooperative. "You must be joking!" He removed neither his eyes from his comic book nor the cigarette from his mouth. "Drive that jalopy out there? Watcher trying to do—trap me?"

"I was merely asking if you went out in it last night," said MacGregor.

"Not last night and not for months!" said Lionel. "Because why? Because it hasn't passed its M.O.T. test, it isn't licensed, and it's not insured. Damn, I should have thought even you punks knew it was a criminal offense to take a car like that on the bleeding road. Besides"—he chucked his cigarette stub vaguely in the direction of the fireplace and reached for the packet on the floor at his side—"I can't afford the petrol."

Mrs. Hutchinson spoke up. "He doesn't get hardly anything from Social Security."

Dover looked hopefully at the packet of cigarettes, but it was not handed round. That was the trouble with these working-class crimes—no bloody perks! Dover vented his disappointment on Lionel. "You took that car out last night, didn't you?"

Lionel turned over the page. "Negative, Fatso!"

"Just because it wasn't taxed and insured?" sneered Dover. "Try pulling the other one!"

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Mrs. Hutchinson came galloping to the rescue again. "He's got to watch his step," she explained. "It's prison next time they catch him."

Lionel raised himself up and glared at his mother with less than filial affection.

Dover had another spot. "You took that car out last night and—"

"Stuff yourself!"

"—ran Bailey down because he was a copper and then—"

"Aw, get knotted!"

"—got out and finished him off as he lay there helpless."

Lionel Hutchinson struggled into a sitting position. "Without nicking his wallet?" Almost as exhausted by the effort as Dover would have been, he sank back. "I was home all evening. Ask my mum!"

Once they were safely outside, Dover waxed bolder. "I'll get that little bleeder!" he promised, looking fierce.

MacGregor took a more moderate line. "I doubt if he'd have the guts to kill a grown man, sir. Mugging old ladies for their pension books is about his limit."

"There's probably a gang of 'em," grunted Dover. He was bored, hungry, thirsty, and suffering from nicotine starvation.

"Perhaps forensic will turn up something on the murder weapon," said MacGregor hopefully. "And I think we must examine these cars again, too. I can't really believe that the car that knocked Bailey down would be completely unmarked."

They were walking slowly back up the hill and Dover was in no condition to contradict everything MacGregor said just for the hell of it.

"Oh, look, sir!" MacGregor pointed. "There's the caravan at last. Good! Now at least we'll have somewhere we can settle down to work in."

Dover shied like a nervous horse at the mere mention of work. "I want my lunch! I'm starving."

"Oh, there'll be coffee and sandwiches in the caravan for sure, sir."

By some miracle Dover found the puff to tell MacGregor what he could do with his coffee and sandwiches, interrupting his tirade only to stick his tongue out at old Mrs. Golightly who was peeping out from behind her curtains.

MacGregor hastened to make amends by giving her a cheery

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smile and raising his hat. "Poor old thing," he said when he could get a word in. "You'd think they could do something better for them than this, wouldn't you, sir? Sticking them out here miles away from anywhere and right on top of those noisy garages, to say nothing of having petrol fumes seeping in through your bathroom window. Good God!"

Afterward both MacGregor and Dover claimed to have spotted it first but, since Dover had fewer inhibitions about bawling his head off on the public highway, he tended to hog the glory at the time.

He stopped dead in his tracks. "But there shouldn't have been any petrol fumes!"

By great good fortune there they were, standing right on the spot. Branching off on the left as they went up the hill was the row of houses for the old-age pensioners. And running up even higher behind them, was Japonica Mount. Miller's small red car was clearly visible, not more than a couple of hundred feet away, still outside Mrs. Jedryschowski's house and still with its nose pointing down the hill.

Dover's brain nearly blew a gasket as he struggled to work it out. "How far," he panted, "on a cold morning would you have to let that car roll down the hill before you could start it?"

MacGregor was amazed at Dover's grasp of the technical problem involved. "Oh, right to the bottom, I imagine, sir. Certainly well past Mrs. Golightly's bathroom window."

"We've got him!" said Dover, and rested his case.

MacGregor felt they needed a little more than that. "Miller could have started his car on the starter this morning for some reason or other, sir."

"Why the hell should he? And even if he did, the fumes still wouldn't get into that old biddie's bog, would they?"

"Not if the car was parked outside Mrs. Jedryschowski's house where it is now, sir," agreed MacGregor. "On the other hand"—his eyes narrowed as he took in the topography of the area—"if he started the car on the starter outside his own house, old Mrs. Golightly would certainly have got the full benefit of both the noise and the smoke. He'd be hardly any distance away as the crow flies."

Dover had had his fill of the Willow Hill Farm Housing Estate. "Come on," he said with unwonted enthusiasm, "let's go get him!"

MacGregor was appalled. "But there could be dozens of perfectly

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innocent explanations, sir," he bleated anxiously. "I think it would be a big mistake for us to go off half-cocked like this before we've—"

"You speak for yourself, laddie!" snorted Dover, already charging up the hill like a two-year-old tortoise. "Me, I've never gone off half-cocked at anything in my whole bloody life!"

It was fortunate for the Cause of Justice that Henry Miller was one of Nature's losers.

"I knew I'd never get away with it," he said dejectedly as Dover lay panting like a stranded whale in one of the armchairs and MacGregor, getting his notebook out, issued the formal caution. "Oh, I don't mind making a statement. Why not?"

"Keep it short," advised Dover, cursing himself for not having had his lunch first. He accepted a cigarette from MacGregor, unaware that it was offered with the sole aim of stopping his mouth up.

But Miller had never been much of a talker in any case. "My wife left me a couple of days ago," he mumbled. "Just went. Late last night I got to wondering if she'd gone to stay with her sister. I thought I'd drive over and see."

"What time did you leave?"

Miller shrugged. "Latish."

"How did you start your car?"

"Like I always do—I let it roll down the hill."

"And you headed for the main road?"

"That's right. I wasn't going fast or anything. Then, just by the zebra crossing, he stepped out right in front of me and—bang!—I hit him. Not hard. I wasn't doing more than twenty. I stopped and got out. Well, he just lay there in the road, cursing me up hill and down dale. A right mouthful. Said I knocked him down deliberate on a pedestrian crossing and he'd have the Law on me.

"Said he'd charge me with dangerous driving and God knows what. I tried to calm him down a bit and ask if he was hurt, but he just kept on shouting. Said he was an ex-policeman and that he'd see me behind bars if it was the last thing he did. Well, he would have, wouldn't he? My word against his? I wouldn't have stood a chance. So I killed him."

"Just like that?" Dover didn't like to hear of policemen being disposed of so casually.

"I couldn't afford to be found guilty, you see," said Miller drearily. "Not on any charge. I've been in trouble before, you see."

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"I'm not surprised," sniffed Dover. "Was it Bailey who nabbed you?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I didn't know Mr. Bailey from Adam."

"Then why kill him, for God's sake?"

Miller sighed heavily. "It was when I was still up north. I"—he cleared his throat and avoided looking at either of his two inquisitors—"well, it was sort of to do with sex."

"Oh, yes?" said Dover, on whom the mouth-stopping cigarette was not working too well.

Miller moistened his lips. "Children, actually," he muttered. "I got six months. But"—he raised his head with a faint show of defiance—"that was four years ago and I haven't been in trouble since. I pulled myself together, see? I moved down here and got myself a good job and got married and everything."

MacGregor understood. "You were afraid that if you were convicted on this motoring charge, your previous record would come out in open court?"

"They say they don't punish you twice for the same offense, but they do. I'd have lost my job straight off. I work at a school, you see. Kids everywhere. And then there's the wife. She'd have never come back if she knew I'd been in the nick for molesting kids. And then there's the neighbors." He appealed to the more sympathetic face confronting him. "You can see how I was fixed, can't you? I couldn't just do nothing and let him ruin my life. I didn't want to kill him, but he give me no choice. I hit him with the wheel brace."

But Dover's heart was not made of stone. He saw how distressed Miller was and was ready with solace. He addressed MacGregor. "Why don't you go and make us all a nice cup of tea, laddie?"

Miller raised his head. "There's a bottle of whiskey in the sideboard," he said shyly.

Dover beamed. "Even better! Where do you keep your glasses?"

Miller's statement was completed in an increasingly convivial atmosphere and he had to be asked several times about the parking of his car after the murder.

"Oh, that," he said. "Well, I forgot all about going after the missus and I come rushing back here. All I wanted was to get out of sight as quick as possible. That's why I left the car right outside instead of driving it to the top of the hill and turning it

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around ready for the morning like I usually do."

"So, when you left for work today, you had to start the car on the starter?" MacGregor, of course, didn't drink on duty and was as sober as a judge.

"That's right. I had the devil of a job with it. It really needs a new battery but, what with one thing and another . . . Anyhow, I won't have to bother about that now, will I?"

"What did you do with the murder weapon?"

"It's under the coal in the shed. I was going to chuck it in the canal when things quietened down. Here"—for the first time Miller showed a flicker of curiosity—"how did you get on to me?"

"It was the break in the pattern, laddie!" said Dover, feeling he owed his host something for the whiskey. "If you'd turned your car and parked it like you always did outside the Jedryschowskis, you'd have got away with it."

MacGregor gawped. How on earth had the old fool managed to hang on to a name like Jedryschowski, for heaven's sake?

"You got cloth ears or something, laddie?"

MacGregor abandoned his disloyal speculations. "Sir?"

"I said, go and get somebody to take him away."

MacGregor hesitated. Leave Dover alone with a self-confessed murderer? "Will you be all right, sir?"

Dover winked wickedly and reached for the whiskey bottle. "Oh, I'll be fine, Sergeant!" he said. "Just fine now!"

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

11 ***NEW*** stories—including

STANLEY ELLIN (about reasons unknown)

GEORGES SIMENON (about Maigret)

RUTH RENDELL (about "truth will out")

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

BILL PRONZINI (about a unique theft)

LAWRENCE BLOCK (about Ehrengraf)

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a *NEW* short story by

ERNEST SAVAGE

When your next-door neighbor is in trouble—in the deepest possible trouble—how far do you go to help him? But suppose your neighbor is also your very best friend, then how far do you go? Bill Harlan had no doubt in his own mind how far to go. His instinctive, reflexive response was—all the way . . .

THE FIRST OF ALL RULES

by ERNEST SAVAGE

I was awake the morning he left—but only technically. I come out of sleep the way a bear comes out of hibernation—that's what Martha used to say—slowly, fighting it all the way.

I heard his pickup crunch down the private gravel lane that links his place to mine, cut in on my drive, and roll to a stop in front of my kitchen windows. And I heard him holler a few words at me, wave, and drive away. My neighbor, Chuck Clark.

What he said was, "I'm gonna visit this friend of mine at Teal Lake for a few days, Bill. Fishing. Back on Tuesday or Wednesday."

I waved back at him reflexively through the open window and watched him drive off toward town. It was a little before eight.

I hadn't had my coffee yet and didn't relate Chuck's taking off with the epic battle of the night before until I was halfway through my first cup. He and Helen had had a dandy, the worst of a long series: Slamming doors, shouts, curses, the whole playbill of domestic strife—and it's a damn shame. Chuck is 66, Helen a few years younger, 62 maybe. He's been retired for a year now and that's how long it's been going on. When Chuck worked, he was home only on weekends and that much of each other was all they could take apparently. They're nice people individually; in fact, they're the nicest people I know, especially Chuck who's become

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my best friend over the ten years we've been neighbors.

At nine o'clock I shaved, got dressed, and sat down at my desk to look at what I had for the column I write for the local weekly. Not much. They want a thousand words and I didn't have more than a hundred yet. They pay me $25 a column, which is all right. It picks up some of the slack my pension doesn't cover, and with Martha gone now, I don't need much more.

Martha was a Gray Lady before she died last year and belonged to the Flower Club and the Sewing Circle and a few other things, and what I'd do is, I'd listen to her blather away in the evening about who she'd seen that day, who was doing what to whom, and so forth, and that would pretty much make up my column. A sort of small-town bulletin board, with a few one-liners scattered through it to keep your attention. I enjoy it. It gives me something to do besides the water colors I fiddle with and the garden. But with Martha gone, it's less fun than it used to be and more work.

Helen has been a big help to me since Martha died. She's a Gray Lady herself and gets around town almost as much as Martha did; and about twice a week I go up to her and Chuck's place with my notebook and pick up some items for my column. I don't usually go up after they've had one of their rows—every bit of which I can hear on a warm night with the windows open—but now with Chuck having left, I thought it wouldn't matter.

Chuck; it just occurred to me; he'd stopped by to say he'd be away for a few days because he and I were supposed to go fishing tomorrow, Saturday. As I say, I'm slow in the morning.

I thought I heard her singing. Helen sings around the house, the way some people do, especially with Chuck away. Helen has a voice you can't mistake and she sings the oldies, like *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* and *Stardust,* and so on. I thought I heard her singing *Stardust* that morning after Chuck left, but I couldn't be sure. Sound travels far and follows strange paths in the quiet air of this mountain town, so it could've been something from a half mile away. Besides, I don't suppose my hearing's what it used to be, either.

Around 10:30 I got my notebook and walked up the lane to Chuck's place. What I usually do is knock on the kitchen door and one of them will holler to come in; but if that doesn't work, I open the door, stick my head in, and yell hello. And if that doesn't work, they're plain not at home.

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Well, I knocked, but I guess Helen didn't hear me, so I tried the door and when I found it locked I was as surprised as if the knob had grown teeth. It's almost unheard of around here to lock your doors unless you're going to be gone a couple of weeks—and even then you usually don't.

I peered through the glass, but couldn't see anything, so I went around to the front door, a little disturbed now, and tried that. But it was locked too. I really banged on it, but Helen didn't answer. I began circling the house looking through the windows.

She was on the floor between the dining room and living room, where the step-down is. I could see her clearly through a front window. She was on her back, her legs on the dining-room level, the rest of her on the living-room level. And she looked dead.

What I did next was pure reflex. I knocked out the glass of the window with a rock, slid the frame up, and climbed over the sill.

She was dead all right, but hadn't been for long because there was still heat in her arm where I touched it. I sat down on the step next to her legs and stared at her. She was a pretty woman and in death, with its repose, she seemed almost beautiful to me. I'd done a half-dozen pencil sketches of her in preparation for a water-color portrait, but I'd never really seen the good bones in her face until now. And of course her eyes were closed.

But handsome is as handsome does, I thought, and maybe she was at her best right now, still animate-looking, but the angers gone, the tensions released. Down through the years Chuck had told me more about her than I'd really wanted to know. Sitting in a boat in the middle of a High Sierra lake, with no other living thing in sight, a man will sometimes empty his heart and Chuck had to me. A friend's job is to listen.

Oh, I could see some of it without Chuck's help—her cleanliness fetish, for instance, dusting everything in the house a couple of times a day and laundry on her line almost all the time. Those are things a neighbor sees; but Chuck—denied almost from the first the comforts of the bed, his pretty young bride freezing under the gentlest touch of his hand—sees something else. And finally, recoiling, he cannot bear to see it any more. He shouldn't have retired.

I got up and knelt by her head. The hair just above the base of her neck on the left seemed matted and I thought I saw the dark stain of blood soaking into the carpet beneath. But I couldn't be sure; I didn't want to be sure.

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I stood up straight and listened. I'd been in this house hundreds of times, but it was different now, the inertia of death in its air, of murder. This place, nothing, would ever be the same again.

Looking down at her, I could see the logic of her being there, of her being dead. It was the final place in a pattern that had been forming for years—and it could not have been otherwise. This was the only way he could leave her—

A rush of fear for him filled my chest. He was on the run, a fugitive. "Back on Tuesday or Wednesday," he had said; or was it "Doomsday"? Or was it never?

Teal Lake? A coworker of his who had retired at the same time lived there—a man named Mike. He and Chuck had shared an apartment in Sacramento on week days when they both worked there. Chuck had visited him a couple times already since retirement. Was he really going there, or was it merely something he knew I'd pass on to the Sheriff? A false spoor. No, he was an honest open man with no cunning in him—except with a rod and reel in his hand.

I went to the small desk in the dining room where the phone was and looked in the address book there. There was a "Mike" listed at Teal Lake and a phone number, but no address. I put the book in my pocket, looked around one last time, left through the kitchen door, went home, and called the Sheriff. It was now 10:50.

Three of them came, two in uniform, one in mufti. I met them in my driveway and we walked from there up the lane to Chuck's place and in through the kitchen door. The man in mufti had a camera and began to take pictures. Sergeant James, one of the uniformed men, was in charge. He looked at the phone in the dining room and then said to me, "Did you use that phone to call us, Mr. Harlan?"

"No. I went home. I used mine."

"Where's Mr. Clark? He work?"

"No. I saw him drive away this morning around eight. He's retired."

"Oh?" James went to the phone, picked it up delicately in a handkerchief, and dialed a number. I heard him tell someone to send out the Medical Examiner and give them Chuck's address. The Medical Examiner would have to come from the county seat which was 35 miles away. James and the others had come from the local substation. I hadn't told them she'd been killed, I just said she appeared to be dead. But it hadn't gained much time.

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"Around eight, you say?" James said.

"Yes."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No. I was barely out of bed. But—"

"But what?"

"Well, around nine or so I heard Mrs. Clark singing."

"Oh?"

"Yes. *Stardust*."

"Around nine? After Mr. Clark drove away."

"Yes."

"Where did he go, do you know?"

"No. No idea. Look," I added, "I'm not enjoying this much. May I go home now?"

"Sure, in a minute. What kind of car does Mr. Clark drive?"

"It's not a car, it's a pickup."

"What kind?"

"Well, an old Dodge, I think. I'm not sure, maybe a Ford."

"What color?"

"Hmmm. Well, sort of dusty white, I guess. Ask me what color car I drive, Sergeant, and I'd have to think about it first. Beige maybe. A light color, anyhow. May I go now?"

"We'll want a statement, Mr. Harlan. This woman's been murdered."

"I'll be home," I said.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table to think. It was 11:25. Teal Lake was about 200 miles away and about 7000 feet high in the mountains to the south. I'd never been there, but I knew where it was. It would take Chuck about five hours to get there—if that's where he was going. He'd have gone down into the valley from here, picked up US 5, gone south to Stockton, then east into the hills. A lot of it would be winding mountain road and slow going. At two o'clock, maybe, I'd put in a call for him—and sat there wondering what I'd say.

I wouldn't be telling him anything he didn't know, that's for sure, but I wanted him to know he had a friend, that I was *still* a friend. I didn't want him to get caught, irrational though that hope was. His truck was dark green, a '74 Dodge. I knew that as well as I know my own name, but maybe it would slow them down an hour or two even if they started looking for him right away—if for no other reason than to tell him his wife was dead,

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had been murdered. Maybe if he made it to Teal Lake, Mike would hide him out. Maybe Mike was as good a friend as I was.

I hoped so. I hoped Chuck would never get caught. He'd paid enough already for his life with Helen. Every day, every night, he'd paid. It made no sense that he spend his few remaining good years behind bars. He'd put in 40 years of servitude already, and that should be enough to satisfy justice.

I'd got that far with my thoughts when I remembered I'd gone through the window and not the door, and I sat up a little straighter in my chair. I'd taken James and the others in through the kitchen door and I hadn't mentioned going through the window because it simply hadn't occurred to me. Now it did, in full color and sound—and a thrill coursed up my spine.

I liked it. It was obvious: someone had broken in, hit Helen on the head, then fled in panic. We don't get much of that sort of thing up here, but we've been getting more of it lately, and it would make sense; they'd buy it.

But what about fingerprints? A second thrill coursed my spine, less welcome. I closed my eyes and thought about it hard. I'd knocked the glass out with a rock, which I then tossed aside. Then I reached in and turned the little latch with the tip of my thumb. Then with the nails of my left hand I'd slid the window all the way open. It was a low window, low enough so that I could swing my left leg over the sill, which I did. Then, with the notebook still in my right hand, I'd used my leg to pull myself through. The notebook had touched the frame and sill of the window, not my hand.

I reviewed it again, slowly and carefully, and was satisfied. If I'd left any prints at all they'd be too fragmentary to identify. And besides, there was no way I could go back up there now and tell James I'd gone through the window and not the door. No, a nameless intruder would get the blame.

At 12:20 the Medical Examiner drove up the lane to Chuck's house in a County Coroner's station wagon. He had two men with him. I got up quickly and went to the rear of my house in time to see them through my bedroom window park in front of Chuck's garage. Chuck's house is about 60 feet from mine at that point, with a chain-link fence marking the property line between us and thick-trunked oaks and pines scattered here and there in both our yards.

A uniformed man outside Chuck's house was standing at the

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window I'd broken, looking through, and another of those cold fingers touched my spine. He was standing just about where I had stood, which was dumb of him, but as I watched he seemed to realize that and almost leaped aside.

I had on old brown loafers, one of several pairs I own. I sat on my unmade bed, took them off, and looked at the soles. Bits of soil, no doubt from in front of Chuck's window, clung to them and I took them into the bathroom and brushed the soil off into the john. Then I put the shoes into the Good Will bag, still hanging in Martha's closet, and put on another pair of loafers almost identical with the first. There was no way they could connect me with that window.

I was excited; I could see Chuck going scot-free now—*if only I could get in touch with him before they did.* A whole new world suddenly opened up in my mind. Sell both houses, take that freighter trip we'd talked about so often. Around the world. Martha had been dead nearly a year now and nothing held me here save habit, habit and Chuck, the one irreplaceable friend I'd ever had.

He was a literate, witty, gentle man, a perennial student of the world, of history, art; a wise man, the best of companions. Spend two or three days fishing with a man on some remote lonely lake and he either washes, or washes out. It's an acid test and we had passed a lot of them together. You become Damon and Pythias.

But I would have to find him before they did. It was 12:35 and I was hungry now. I'd try phoning Teal Lake after I ate.

There was no answer. I let Mike's phone ring 15 times before I hung up. It was too early yet. If Chuck stopped for lunch he wouldn't get there until two o'clock or later. And maybe, I thought, Mike has a job or is out on the lake.

Sergeant James knocked on my door at 1:30 and I let him in. He looked tired, so I offered him some coffee, which he accepted. He was fairly new at the substation, but I'd seen him around once or twice and he'd seen me.

"You write that column for the weekly *Post,* don't you?" he said.

"Yes."

"It's good. I like it. It's snappy."

"Thanks."

"You a newspaper man by profession, Mr. Harlan?"

"No. I'm a retired schoolteacher."

He lit a cigarette and I got a saucer for him as an ashtray. I

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don't smoke. "How come," he said, "you told me Clark's truck was light-colored?"

"Isn't it?"

"We got a DMV report a while ago, Mr. Harlan. It's dark green, a '74 Dodge, not so old. I mean I would think a man as observant as you—I mean, you're a columnist and all that—would have known better."

"Better than what?"

"Well, I mean would have known what color truck his neighbor drives."

"I don't pay much attention to things like that, Sergeant."

"But you hear things—right?"

"Like what?"

"Like Mrs. Clark singing after Mr. Clark left. You said you thought you heard her singing this morning."

"I did."

"Did she have a good voice, Mr. Harlan?"

"No. Just a big voice. You know Ethel Merman?"

"Yes."

"Like Ethel Merman's. It penetrates."

"What time was it?"

"I don't know. Around nine, maybe. Maybe a little later."

"You're sure now?"

"I'm sure, Sergeant."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"No. Like what?"

"Like glass breaking, maybe."

"No. Why would I hear that?"

"Somebody broke Clark's living-room window sometime, maybe this morning."

"You mean broke and entered? Is that how—?"

"We don't know, Mr. Harlan. How did you get in this morning when you found her?"

"Through the kitchen door."

"It was open?"

"Of course it was open. It's always open, day and night, just like mine."

"How come you went over there? I mean with Mr. Clark gone and all—"

I sighed. "Look, Sergeant," I said, "we're old friends, we've been neighbors for many years. If you're suggesting—"

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"I'm not suggesting anything, Mr. Harlan. I'd just like to know how come you went up there this morning."

My notebook was on the kitchen table. I pointed to it. "Mrs. Clark is a Gray Lady," I said. "*Was* a Gray Lady. She knew everybody in town. Half of what you've read in my column lately has come from her. I took my notebook up there this morning because I've got to have a thousand words in by Tuesday morning and I don't have a hundred yet."

"And you went in through the kitchen door, which was open?"

"Yes. First I knocked, of course, and hollered. Then I went in."

James rubbed his brow and then stubbed out his cigarette. "Let's assume," he said, "that somebody busted that window after Mr. Clark left this morning—it looks fresh enough. Okay, so why would he do that if he could simply walk through an unlocked kitchen door?"

"I don't know."

"And you heard nothing—I mean no glass breaking?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just *Stardust* in that Ethel Merman voice."

Sergeant James finished his coffee and stood up. He looked tired now; but I've seldom seen a cop who didn't look that way. He appeared to be about 40 and maybe he'd had enough of it already.

"What killed her?" I said.

"She got hit on the head with something, Mr. Harlan. But that's all we know at the moment. The M.E. will do an autopsy this afternoon and then we'll know more." He turned and headed for the door, then turned again. "Listen, I'd like you to come down to the substation this afternoon, say about four, and give us a statement. Okay?"

"Glad to," I said.

They not only took a statement from me that afternoon, they also took my prints, both finger and palm. James wasn't there, but the man I dealt with said it was simply routine. "Anyone involved gets the full treatment," he said airily, "and you're involved. Don't worry about it, Mr. Harlan."

Sure, I thought, but going back home it nagged me and I reviewed for the fourth or fifth time exactly how I'd gone through that window, and was less confident now that I hadn't left something there they could have picked up. I was tempted momentarily to go back down and change my story, but common sense told me it was too late for that; and besides, it would point the finger

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once again at Chuck, and that was out of the question. The nameless intruder was still our man.

I'd dialed Mike's number at 2:00 and 2:30 and 3:00 and 3:30, and when I got back home I dialed it again, with the same result: no answer. They'd told me at the substation that Chuck hadn't been located yet, but would be soon, they felt sure. An APB had been out on him since just before noon. They wanted to let him know his wife was dead, that somebody had broken into his house and murdered her after he'd left.

A woman answered my call at 6:00, and I said involuntarily, "Well, finally!" Then I said, "Is Mike there?"

"I'm Mike," she said.

"*You're* Mike?"

"Well, Michele, but I'm called Mike. Who is this?"

"Is Chuck Clark there?"

"Who is this, please?"

"This is Bill Harlan," I said, "and I must talk to Chuck right now. It's very important."

"Just a minute," she said, and the phone went dead in my ear as though she'd put her hand over the receiver. I waited impatiently, absorbing with difficulty the fact that "Mike" was a woman, and watching just then, through my kitchen window, Sergeant James's car turn into my drive. I spoke Chuck's name, heard him answer, and told him not to say a thing, to just listen, and told him rapid-fire what had happened since he left, leaving nothing out.

James had knocked twice on my kitchen door before I was through and before Chuck said, "You mean I'm in the clear, Bill?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll call you later. Just remember—if they find you, or *when* they do—you don't know a thing about it." Then I hung up and went over and let James and another uniformed man into my kitchen.

It was 6:15 and I usually have a glass of wine before my evening meal. So I asked James and the other man, whom I'd never seen before, if they'd care to join me. I thought it was pretty cool, but James said no and the other man just stared at me. Then James lit a cigarette, took a card from his jacket pocket, and read the Miranda language to me.

It was a re-run. I'd seen it a hundred times on TV and it seemed like a re-run to me, something they show in late August when they've reached the bottom of the barrel. I poured myself a

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glass of wine from my gallon jug of burgundy and sat down at the kitchen table with it. "What's that mean?" I said.

"Just what it says," James said. "Anything you say may be used against you. Do you want a lawyer, Harlan?"

"No. Why would I want a lawyer?" I drank a big sip of wine.

"Because you're a suspect in the murder of Mrs. Helen Clark."

"Oh, come on, Sergeant. Whoever came through that window killed her."

"I agree, Harlan, and you're the guy who came through it. We've got a clear print of your left palm on the sill."

"I'm in the place all the time," I said. "My prints must be all over it."

"This was fresh, Harlan, today's issue. And from the placement it could have been made only by somebody coming in from the outside."

The other man had been poking around my kitchen while James and I talked and now he went through the door behind my chair into the living room. "Where's he going?" I said.

"He's looking around. We have a search warrant for your place, Harlan." He got it out and showed it to me.

"What's he looking for?" I said.

"Anything incriminating."

"All right," I said, "what if I admit I went through the window?"

"We know that. What we want to know is why you killed her. We want your motive."

"I didn't kill her, Sergeant. I saw her on the floor through the window. The doors were locked, so I broke the window to see if I could help her."

"Why didn't you tell me that to start with?"

"Because it just didn't cross my mind," I said earnestly. "That back door is always unlocked—always! Besides, I was shocked by the fact of her death."

"If it was always unlocked, Harlan, why was it locked this morning?"

"I've no idea."

"Maybe she didn't want you to come in. Maybe she knew with her husband gone you'd have a go at her and she didn't want that. Maybe she was scared of you."

"That's ridiculous!"

"How long's your wife been dead, Harlan?"

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"Nearly a year. But why—?"

"You're still a vigorous man. That's a long time for a vigorous man to do without a woman."

They must train them on TV re-runs, I thought in a kind of daze. It's life imitating art, and coming out the worse for it. One cliché after another. When you're a suspect you're no longer Mr. Harlan, you're plain Harlan, and suddenly all the simple little details of your life are heavy with evil.

"How do you know," I said tiredly, "that I've done without?"

The other man appeared just then with three sheets of Strathmore water-color paper, sketches I'd done of Helen over the past couple of months, one of them, the best, outlined lightly in ink. When I got up courage enough I was going to tint it with color, but I don't handle color that well yet—it comes out muddy—and I kept putting it off. Another detail in an innocent life.

James looked at the sketches carefully, and then said surprisingly, "With a voice like Ethel Merman, huh?"

"Yes, but she didn't know it, Sergeant. It could shatter glass."

"And you heard her using it at nine or so this morning?"

"Yes," I said, and knew I'd burned that bridge once and for all. With Chuck on the safe side.

James studied the sketch again, the good one. The other man had returned to his search and I thought, maybe he'll find the shoes in the Good Will bag—but that didn't matter any more. "She was a pretty woman," James said, "and this is a good drawing, Harlan. You must have spent a lot of time with her."

"Why don't you go back to 'Mister' Harlan?" I said. "Just to be different."

James looked at me for a long time, then stood up briskly to indicate he'd made a decision. "Get your toothbrush, Mr. Harlan," he said without inflection. "You're under arrest for the murder of Mrs. Helen Clark."

In classical times Dionysius I of Syracuse condemned Pythias to death for treasonous plotting against the state, but allowed him to arrange his affairs when Pythias' friend Damon pledged his own life if Pythias failed to return. But Pythias did return, just in time to face execution, and Dionysius was so impressed by this demonstration of true friendship that he released them both.

It's a charming story and I recalled it a number of times while

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languishing in jail that weekend. I'm a simple man; I believe in loyalty and cleanliness and all the other virtues that Boy Scouts are pledged to respect. I doubt that many people do any more, but I do, and I believe Chuck does—Chuck being Pythias in this case. Chuck wouldn't let me pay for something he did. No way.

They "found" him Sunday afternoon. Sergeant James told me that Chuck had heard a radio appeal for him to return home and had phoned the Sheriff promising to arrive later that night. James was seated on the bunk opposite mine in my cell in the substation. I'd be moved down to the county-seat jail tomorrow morning, James said, for the hearing and arraignment. Arraignment would be tomorrow afternoon before Judge Henry Carter. The D.A. was going to ask for an indictment on a charge of murder in the second degree.

James recited all this in his usual flat, tired voice and told me once again I should get a lawyer. It still had the quality of old TV, but I was adamant, claiming I'd done nothing more heinous than break a neighbor's window. I was calm in my certainty: Chuck had killed her and if I wasn't cleared, he'd come forward and say so. Pythias to my Damon.

The hearing was held at 10:00 A.M. on Monday, and Chuck was there, as I knew he'd be. He looked good, at his ease, even though he was dressed untypically in suit, vest, and tie.

The hearing was brief, but went well for me, I thought, especially when I had Chuck on the stand. He did not fake bereavement at Helen's death and I felt a surge of pride in the man, even as I questioned him.

He said Helen was in bed asleep when he left Friday morning and that he knew nothing of her murder until he heard the radio appeal for his return yesterday afternoon. He did not say he'd said goodbye to me because I did not raise the point. And I did not mention Mike, either, because by then I'd rationalized the need for her in his life. Without her, I reasoned, he could not have survived, and that is the first of all rules, the primal law.

Chuck has gray-blue eyes flecked with gold. I had never looked into them as intently as I did when he was on the stand before me that day. He answered the few questions I put to him briefly, almost tersely, but his eyes were eloquent. They were full of reciprocal pride in me for what I'd done. For him. I could feel a bond of loyalty forge itself between us that no blow could sunder. If I were

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not freed of this charge, his eyes told me, he would step forward and accept the blame. Pythias to the core.

The only other witness I questioned was the Medical Examiner. He stated that Helen Clark had died as a result of a blow on the head. He said there was no fracture of the skull, and that the blow probably would not have killed her had her heart been sound; but her heart was not sound—in fact, it was severely diseased. He said that her blood showed a substantial residue of barbiturates, probably from two, possibly three capsules of Seconal taken some eight to ten hours before death. He said that whoever had killed her had killed a sick, possibly dying woman.

After the Medical Examiner left the stand, my eyes locked on Chuck's for a moment and I thought, with heavy irony, that if he'd just waited a while it would have worked out for him without all this secrecy. Obviously he had not known about her heart.

I was arraigned that afternoon on a charge of murder in the second degree. I asked Judge Carter to release me on my own recognizance (more old TV), but he denied the request and set bail at $10,000.

I was released late Friday afternoon, almost one week exactly after being arrested. I'd arranged to mortgage my house in the required amount and it took that long to process it through.

I got home well after dark and almost immediately went to bed. But not to sleep. It was beginning to come to me slowly, reluctantly, one grudging piece at a time, what had happened. It had started on the bus coming home and grew steadily, like a brewing storm. It was all a mistake, a ghastly mistake.

I slept until mid-morning and got up more exhausted than I'd been when I went to bed. I made coffee and drank some, then went outside to look at my garden. It needed water and weeding; it needed Martha, or some gentle hand with a green thumb. Not my clumsy hand. The sprawling graceful oaks and the tall stately pines were dead-still in the cool morning air. The world seemed to have stopped. It had all been a ghastly mistake.

A man came down the lane from Chuck's place and cut across when he saw me. He looked like a city man—San Francisco, maybe. "I understand," he said, gesturing at Chuck's house, "this place is for sale."

It didn't surprise me. "So," I said.

"I understand," the man said, "a woman got murdered in it last

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week. They want too much money for a house that someone got murdered in."

"How much they asking?"

"Sixty-five thousand, for God's sake."

I looked at him through eyes from which scales had been falling as fast as autumn leaves. I didn't like him. He wasn't Chuck; nobody would ever be Chuck. Not even Chuck.

"Nobody got murdered there," I said, "but you're right, it's too much money. Try over on the other side of the ridge."

"Hell," the man said, turning away, "country slickers."

Nobody had murdered Helen Clark. Chuck thought that I'd killed her—that was plain now—and I had thought that he had. But neither of us had. She'd got up after Chuck left, still half doped, stumbled, hit something with her head, got up again, walked to the dining room and fallen down dead, her heart given out. It was as simple as that. I should have known from the first. Chuck hadn't needed an alibi; Chuck hadn't needed anything.

The tomato plants were badly wilted. I started a hose and stood there with it in my hand, letting it run where it would. That look in Chuck's eyes on the stand had been a look of scarcely controlled joy. He thought I'd killed her; but even if he'd had no cause to think that, he knew from the testimony at the hearing that *he* was in the clear, and that's all that mattered to him. A look of pure joy. He was off now on a new life with a girl named Mike; his old house was on the market, and he wouldn't come back unless dragged. He wouldn't come back now even to get me off the hook if he *had* murdered her. *His* alibi was *my* frame—and so be it, his eyes had said. Maybe a touch of thanks in them on the stand last Monday: thanks, Bill, you've been a brick—you dumb idiot.

The water had run out of the basin around the tomatoes and over my shoes. It seemed fitting and I half smiled.

"Pythias is a mythias," I said aloud, and the smile became a soft bitter laugh. If he can get sixty-five thousand for that shabby dump of his, I thought, I can get at least that much for mine.

And Monday I'll hire the best lawyer I can find.

And then I thought: *Why were the doors locked*? They had never been before. *He did kill her!*

It was the last scale to fall from my eyes, but in my new clarity of vision I could see nothing ahead that looked even remotely good for me.

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In which Kek Huuygens, the world's greatest smuggler, accepts a challenge by agreeing to a unique bet . . .

THE WAGER

by ROBERT L. FISH

I suppose if I were watching television coverage of the return of a lunar mission and Kek Huuygens climbed out of the command module after splashdown, I shouldn't be greatly surprised. I'd be even less surprised to see Kek hustled aboard the aircraft carrier and given a thorough search by a suspicious Customs official. Kek, you see, is one of those men who turn up at very odd times in unexpected places. Also, he is rated by the customs services of nearly every nation in the world as the most talented smuggler alive.

Polish by birth, Dutch by adopted name, the holder of a valid U.S. passport, multilingual, a born sleight-of-hand artist, Kek is an elusive target for the stolid bureaucrat who thinks in terms of hollow shoe heels and suitcases with false bottoms. Now and then over the years, Kek has allowed me to publish a little of his lore in my column. When I came across him last, however, he was doing something very ordinary in a commonplace setting. Under the critical eye of a waiter he was nursing a beer at a table in that little sunken-garden affair in Rockefeller Center.

Before I got to his table, I tried to read the clues. Kek had a good tan and he looked healthy. But his suit had a shine that came from wear rather than from silk thread. A neat scissors trim didn't quite conceal the fact that his cuffs were frayed. He was not wearing his usual boutonniere.

"I owe you three cognacs from last time—Vaduz, wasn't it?—and I'm buying," I said as I sat down.

"You are a man of honor," he said and called to the waiter, naming the most expensive cognac. Then he gave me his wide friendly smile. "Yes, you have read the signs and they are true—but not for any reasons you might imagine. Sitting before you, you can observe the impoverishment that comes from total suc-

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cess. Failure can be managed, but success can be a most difficult thing to control."

Hidden inside every Kek Huuygens aphorism there is a story. But if you want it produced, you must pretend complete indifference. "Ah, yes," I said, "failure is something you know in your heart. Success is something that lies in the eye of the beholder. I think—"

"Do you want to hear the story or don't you?" Kek said. "You can't use it in your column, though, I warn you."

"Perhaps in time?"

"Perhaps in time all barbarous customs regulations will be repealed," he said. "Perhaps the angels will come down to rule the earth. Until then you and I alone will share this story." That was Kek's way of saying "Wait until things have cooled off."

It all began in Las Vegas (Huuygens said) and was primarily caused by two unfortunate factors: one, that I spoke the word banco aloud and, two, that it was heard. I am still not convinced that the player against me wasn't the world's best card manipulator, but at any rate I found myself looking at a jack and a nine, while the best I could manage for myself was a six. So I watched my money disappear, got up politely to allow the next standee to take my place, and started for the exit.

I had enough money in the hotel safe to pay my bill and buy me a ticket back to New York—a simple precaution I recommend to all who never learn to keep quiet in a baccarat game—and a few dollars in my pocket; but my financial position was not one any sensible banker would have lent money against. I was sure something would turn up, as it usually did, and in this case it turned up even faster than usual because I hadn't even reached the door before I was stopped.

The man who put his hand on my arm did so in a completely friendly manner, and I recalled him as being one of the group standing around the table during the play. There was something faintly familiar about him, but even quite famous faces are disregarded at a baccarat table; one is not there to collect autographs. The man holding my arm was short, heavy, swarthy, and of a type to cause instant distaste on the part of any discerning observer.

What caught and held my attention was that he addressed me by name—and in French. "M'sieu Huuygens?" he said. To my ab-

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solute amazement he pronounced it correctly. I acknowledged that I was, indeed, M'sieu Kek Huuygens. "I should like to talk with you a moment and to buy you a drink," he said.

"I could use one," I admitted, and I allowed him to lead me into the bar. As we went, I noticed two men who had been standing to one side studying their fingernails; they now moved with us and took up new positions to each side, still studying their nails. One would think that fingernails were a subject that could quickly bore, but apparently not to those two. As I sat down beside my chubby host, I looked at him once more, and suddenly recognition came.

He saw the light come on in the little circle over my head and smiled, showing a dazzling collection of white teeth, a tribute to the art of the dental laboratory.

"Yes," he said, "I am Antoine Duvivier," and waved over a waiter. We ordered and I returned my attention to him. Duvivier, as you must know—even newspapermen listen to the radio, I assume—was the president of the island of St. Michel in the Caribbean, or had been until his loyal subjects decided that presidents should be elected, after which he departed in the middle of the night, taking with him most of his country's treasury.

He could see the wheels turning in my head as I tried to see how I could use this information to my advantage, and I must say he waited politely enough while I was forced to give up on the problem. Then he said, "I have watched you play at baccarat."

We received our drinks and I sipped, waiting for him to go on.

"You are quite a gambler, M'sieu Huuygens," he said, "but, of course, you would have to be, in your line of work." He saw my eyebrows go up and added quite coolly, "Yes, M'sieu Huuygens, I have had you investigated, and thoroughly. But please permit me to explain that it was not done from idle curiosity. I am interested in making you a proposition."

I find, in situations like this, the less said the better, so I said nothing.

"Yes," he went on, "I should like to offer you—" He paused, as if reconsidering his words, actually looking embarrassed, as if he were guilty of a *gaffe*. "Let me rephrase that," he said and searched for a better approach. At last he found it. "What I meant was, I should like to make a *wager* with you, a wager I am sure should be most interesting to a gambler such as yourself."

This time, of course, I had to answer, so I said, "Oh?"

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"Yes," he said, pleased at my instant understanding. "I should like to wager twenty thousand dollars of my money, against two dollars of yours, that you will *not* bring a certain object from the Caribbean through United States Customs and deliver it to me in New York City."

I must admit that I admire bluntness, and that the approach was unique.

"The odds are reasonable," I admitted. "One might even say generous. What type of object are we speaking of?"

He lowered his voice. "It is a carving," he said. "A Tien Tse Huwai, dating back to eight centuries before Christ. It is of ivory and is not particularly large; I imagine it could fit into your coat pocket, although, admittedly, it would be bulky. It depicts a village scene—but you, I understand, are an art connoisseur; you may have heard of it. In translation, its name is *The Village Dance.*"

Normally I can control my features, but my surprise must have shown, for Duvivier went on in the same soft voice. "Yes, I have it. The carving behind that glass case in the St. Michel National Gallery is a copy—a plastic casting, excellently done, but a copy. The original is at the home of a friend in Barbados. I could get it that far, but I was afraid to attempt bringing it the rest of the way; to have lost it would have been tragic. Since then I have been looking for a man clever enough to get it into the States without being stopped by Customs." He suddenly grinned, those white blocks of teeth almost blinding me. "I am offering ten-thousand-to-one odds that that clever man is *not* you."

It was a cute ploy, but that was not what interested me at the moment.

"M'sieu," I said simply, "permit me a question: I am familiar with the Tien *Village Dance*. I have never seen it, but it received quite a bit of publicity when your National Gallery purchased it, since it was felt—if you will pardon me—that the money could have been used better elsewhere. However, my surprise a moment ago was not that you have the carving; it was at your offer. The Tien, many years in the future, may, indeed, command a large price, but the figure your museum paid when you bought it was, as I recall, not much more than the twenty thousand dollars you are willing to—ah—wager to get it into this country. And that value could only be realized at a legitimate sale, which would be difficult, it seems to me, under the circumstances."

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Duvivier's smile had been slowly disappearing as I spoke. Now he was looking at me in disappointment.

"You do not understand, M'sieu," he said, and there was a genuine touch of sadness in his voice. "To you, especially after your losses tonight, I am sure the sum of twenty thousand dollars seems a fortune, but, in all honesty, to me it is not. I am not interested in the monetary value of the carving; I have no intention of selling it. I simply wish to own it."

He looked at me with an expression I have seen many times before—the look of a fanatic, a zealot, a Collector, with a capital C. "You cannot possibly comprehend," he repeated, shaking his head. "It is such an incredibly lovely thing . . ."

Well, of course, he was quite wrong about my understanding, or lack of it; I understood perfectly. For a moment I almost found myself liking the man; but only for a moment. And a wager is a wager, and I had to admit I had never been offered such attractive odds before in my life. As for the means of getting the carving into the United States, especially from Barbados, I had a thought on that, too. I was examining my idea in greater detail when his voice broke in on me.

"Well?" he asked, a bit impatiently.

"You have just made yourself a bet," I said. "But it will require a little time."

"How much time?" Now that I was committed, the false friendliness was gone from both voice and visage; for all practical purposes, I was now merely an employee.

I thought a moment. "It's hard to say. Less than two months but probably more than one."

He frowned. "Why so long?" I merely shrugged and reached for my glass. "All right," he said grudgingly. "And how do you plan on getting it through Customs?" My response to this was to smile at him gently, so he gave up. "I shall give you a card to my friend in Barbados, which will release the carving into your care. After that"—he smiled again, but this time it was a bit wolfish for my liking—"our wager will be in effect. We will meet at my apartment in New York."

He gave me his address, together with his telephone number, and then handed me a second card with a scrawl on it to a name in Barbados, and that was that. We drank up, shook hands, and I left the bar, pleased to be working again and equally pleased to be quit of Duvivier, if only for a while.

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Huuygens paused and looked at me with his satanic eyebrows tilted sharply. I recognized the expression and made a circular gesture over our glasses, which was instantly interpreted by our waiter. Kek waited until we were served, thanked me gravely, and drank. I settled back to listen, sipping. When next Huuygens spoke, however, I thought at first he was changing the subject, but I soon learned this was not the case.

Anyone who says the day of travel by ship has passed (Huuygens went on) has never made an examination of the brochures for Caribbean cruises that fill and overflow the racks of travel agencies. It appears that between sailings from New York and sailings from Port Everglades—not to mention Miami, Baltimore, Norfolk, and others—almost everything afloat must be pressed into service to transport those Americans with credit cards and a little free time to the balmy breezes and shimmering sands of the islands.

They have trips for all seasons, as well as for every taste and pocketbook. There are bridge cruises to St. Lucia, canasta cruises to Trinidad, golf cruises to St. Croix. There are seven-day cruises to the Bahamas, eight-day cruises to Jamaica, 13-day cruises to Martinique; there are even—I was not surprised to see—three-day cruises to nowhere. And it struck me that even though it was approaching summer, a cruise would be an ideal way to travel; it had been one of my principal reasons for requiring so much time to consummate the deal.

So I went to the travel agency in the hotel lobby and was instantly inundated with schedules and pamphlets. I managed to get the reams of propaganda to my room without a bellboy, sat down on the bed, and carefully made my selection. When I had my trip laid out to my satisfaction, I descended once again to the hotel lobby and presented my program to the travel agent.

He must have thought I was insane, but I explained I suffered from Widget Syndrome and required a lot of salt air, after which he shrugged and picked up the phone to confirm my reservations through New York. They readily accepted my credit card for the bill—which I sincerely hoped to be able to honor by the time it was presented—and two days later I found myself in Miami, boarding the M. V. Andropolis for a joyous 16-day cruise. It was longer than I might have chosen, but it was the only one that fit my schedule and I felt that I would shortly earn the rest.

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I might as well tell you right now that it was a delightful trip. I should have preferred to have taken along my own feminine companionship, but my finances would not permit it; there are, after all, such hard-cash outlays as bar bills and tips. However, there was no lack of unattached women aboard, some even presentable, and the days—as they say—fairly flew. We had the required rum punch in Ocho Rios, fought off the beggars in Port-au-Prince, visited Bluebeard's Castle in Charlotte Amalie, and eventually made it to Barbados.

Barbados is a lovely island, with narrow winding roads that skirt the ocean and cross between the Caribbean and Atlantic shores through high stands of sugar cane that quite efficiently hide any view of approaching traffic; but my rented car managed to get me to the address I had been given without brushing death more than three or four times. The man to whom I presented the ex-president's card was not in the least perturbed to be giving up the carving; if anything, he seemed relieved to be rid of its responsibility. It was neatly packaged in straw, wrapped in brown paper, and tied with twine, and I left it exactly that way as I drove back to the dock through the friendly islanders, all of whom demonstrated their happy, carefree insouciance by walking in the middle of the road.

There was no problem about carrying the package aboard. Other passengers from the M. V. Andropolis were forming a constant line, like ants, to and from the ship, leaving empty-handed to return burdened with Wedgwood, Hummel figures, camera lenses, and weirdly woven straw hats that did not fit. I gave up my boarding pass at the gangplank, climbed to my deck, and locked myself in my stateroom, interested in seeing this carving on which M'sieu Antoine Duvivier was willing to wager the princely sum of $20,000.

The paper came away easily enough. I eased the delicate carving from its bed of straw and took it to the light of my desk lamp. At first I was so interested in studying the piece for its authenticity that the true beauty of the carving didn't strike me; but when I finally came to concede that I was, indeed, holding a genuine Tien Tse Huwai in my hands and got down to looking at the piece itself, I had to admit that M'sieu Duvivier, whatever his other failings, was a man of excellent taste.

I relished the delicate nuances with which Tien had managed his intricate subject, the warmth he had been able to impart to

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his cold medium, the humor he had been genius enough to instill in the ivory scene. Each figure in the relaxed yet ritualistic village dance had his own posture, and although there were easily 40 or 50 men and women involved, carved with infinite detail on a plaque no larger than six by eight inches and possibly three inches in thickness, there was no sense of crowding. One could allow himself to be drawn into the carving, to almost imagine movement or hear the flutes.

I enjoyed the study of the masterpiece for another few minutes, then carefully rewrapped it and tucked it into the air-conditioning duct of my stateroom, pleased that the first portion of my assignment had been completed with such ease. I replaced the grillwork and went upstairs to the bar, prepared to enjoy the remaining three or four days of balmy breezes—if not shimmering sands, since Barbados had been our final port.

The trip back to Miami was enjoyable but uneventful. I lost in the shuffleboard tournament, largely due to a nearsighted partner, but in compensation I picked up a record number of spoons from the bottom of the swimming pool and received in reward, at the captain's party, a crystal ashtray engraved with a design of Triton either coming up or going down for the third time. What I am trying to say is that, all in all, I enjoyed myself completely and the trip was almost compensation for the thorough—and humiliating—search I had to suffer when I finally went through Customs in Miami.

As usual, they did everything but disintegrate my luggage, but at last I was free of Customs—to their obvious chagrin—and I found myself in the street in one piece. So I took myself and my luggage to a hotel for the night.

And the next morning I reboarded the M. V. Andropolis for its next trip—in the same cabin—a restful three-day cruise to nowhere . . .

I see (Kek went on, his eyes twinkling) that intelligence has finally forced its presence on you. I should have thought it was rather obvious. These Caribbean cruise ships vary their schedules, mixing trips to the islands with these short cruises to nowhere, where they merely wander aimlessly upon the sea and eventually find their way back—some say with considerable luck—to their home port. Since they touch no foreign shore, and since the ship's shops are closed during these cruises, one is not faced with the

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delay or embarrassment of facing a Customs agent on one's return.

Therefore, if one were to take a cruise *preceding* a cruise to nowhere and were to be so careless as to inadvertently leave a small object—in the air-conditioning duct of his stateroom, for example—during the turnaround, he could easily retrieve it on the second cruise and walk off the ship with it in his pocket, with no fear of discovery.

Which, of course, is what I did.

The flight to New York was slightly anticlimactic, and I called M'sieu Duvivier as soon as I landed at Kennedy. He was most pleasantly surprised, since less than a month had actually elapsed, and said he would expect me as fast as I could get there by cab.

The ex-president of St. Michel lived in a lovely apartment on Central Park South, and as I rode up in the elevator I thought of how pleasant it must be to have endless amounts of money at one's disposal; but before I had a chance to dwell on that thought too much, we had arrived, and I found myself pushing what I still think was a lapis-lazuli doorbell set in a solid-gold frame. It made one want to weep. At any rate, Duvivier himself answered the door, as anxious as any man I have ever seen. He didn't even wait to ask me in or inquire as to my taste in aperitifs.

"You have it?" he asked, staring at my coat pocket.

"Before we go any further," I said, "I should like you to repeat the exact terms of our wager. The *exact* terms, if you please."

He looked at me in irritation, as if I were being needlessly obstructive.

"All right," he said shortly. "I wagered you twenty thousand dollars of my money against two dollars of yours that you would *not* bring me a small carving from Barbados through United States Customs and deliver it to me in New York. Correct?"

I sighed. "Perfectly correct," I said and reached into my pocket. "You are a lucky man. You won." And I handed him his two dollars.

I stared across the table at Huuygens. I'm afraid my jaw had gone slack. He shook his head at me, a bit sad at my lack of comprehension.

"You can't possibly understand," he said, almost petulantly. "It is so incredibly lovely . . ."

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a *NEW* Dr. Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the retired general practitioner, has become a favorite series character with EQMM readers. Once again he turns detective-archeologist, digs into the past—a half century—and recalls the bizarre details of another "impossible crime." Put them together—a silver-painted plaster statue of the Angel of Good Health, a deadly sword, a revival meeting in which a seven-year-old boy practices faith healing—put them all together and try to solve this "miracle murder" . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE REVIVAL TENT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Didn't I ever tell you about the time I was almost arrested for murder?" Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, reaching up to lift the decanter of brandy off the top shelf. "That was really something! Can't blame the sheriff, though, 'cause it looked like I was the only one there when the murder happened. Just me and the victim, alone in a big tent. The tent? Well, that was for the revival meeting. But maybe I'd better start at the beginning . . ."

I suppose the real beginning—the first time I heard about the revival meeting—was a week before it took place. A retired college professor named Hamus McLaughlin was writing a book on the rituals of American life, and he'd invited me to his home. McLaughlin was such a smooth talker and an ego-builder that I somehow got the idea I was to be the only guest. It was a bit of a surprise to encounter Madge Miller on the front porch, holding a thick scrapbook in her arms.

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Madge was a schoolteacher, just turned 29 in that autumn of 1927. Since we were about the same age and both unmarried, there'd been a few unsuccessful attempts to get us together, in the heavy-handed manner of country folk. She was a good-looking young lady, with a shapely body, but we'd never really hit it off. Wrong chemistry, I guess. That's what somebody today would call it. Seeing her on the porch of Professor McLaughlin's house that evening, though, my first thought was of another marriage plot.

"Well, hello there, Madge. How's life treating you?"

"Dr. Sam! Imagine seeing you here!" She shifted the scrapbook nervously. "Are you part of Hamus McLaughlin's research project too?"

"It seems that I am."

"He's been interviewing people and gathering bits of material for this book of his. Honestly, he's such a wise old gentleman he really intimidates me! Once when he was touring our school he came into my classroom and I just froze. I haven't stood that still since I rode the sorority float in the homecoming parade. I just—"

The door opened and suddenly there was Hamus McLaughlin standing in front of us. I think we both felt like a couple of school kids caught talking in class. I was the first to recover and I held out my hand. "Good to see you again, Professor. How's the leg?"

"Much better, thanks." He'd been suffering from a bit of arthritis, but as he led us into the sitting room there was no evidence of his previous limp.

"I brought my scrapbook that I kept in college," Madge Miller said, laying it on the table. "You can keep it to look through if you want."

The professor smiled at her. He knew how to charm young women. "I'll put it safely away in my desk until I need it, Madge. Spending one's teaching career at Harvard isn't really a preparation for writing about student life on the average American campus."

"Ohio was about as average as you can get," she said. "Sororities, fraternities, football, homecoming parades, the works. The boy I went with had a ukulele and a hip flask—and that was only the first year of Prohibition!"

Professor McLaughlin glanced through the scrapbook and slid it into his desk drawer. "The rituals of college life—I'll find it fascinating." Turning to me he said, "That's to be a chapter in my book, you know. Another will be on the rituals of the rich. Sheriff

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Lens is helping me with legal rituals, and I want your help, Dr. Hawthorne, with the rituals of the sick and the dying."

"I don't know that I can—"

"I believe all of life to be made up of rituals. We pass from one set of rites to another, and I don't just mean in organized religion. The rituals of marriage, and business, and even sports—all of these need to be studied."

"Sounds like a massive task," I observed.

"Massive indeed! My publisher envisions a five-hundred-page book, and it could go even longer. I've already collected piles of research material." He cast a hand around the study and I noticed for the first time the stacks of manila folders, the correspondence waiting to be answered, the thick volumes with slips of paper marking important pages of text.

"I'm afraid that scrapbook is mostly just pictures of me," Madge said, a bit awed by the scholarly tomes.

"All the more reason for me to borrow it. A mixture of research and pleasure."

"I have no scrapbook to offer," I told him. "What do you want from me?"

Hamus McLaughlin picked up a handbill from his desk. "Have you seen these around town? There's to be a revival meeting in a tent out at the fairgrounds next Thursday night. Man named George Yester who travels around the northeast with his wife and seven-year-old son. He claims the child can cure people of illness by laying on of his hands."

"That's crazy!" Madge Miller exploded. "Do you believe such foolishness, Dr. Sam?"

"Certainly not."

"The man should be arrested!"

"I'm sure Sheriff Lens will keep an eye on him. But where do I fit in, Professor?"

McLaughlin shifted in his chair. "I'd like you to accompany me to that revival meeting, Dr. Hawthorne. I'd like your first-hand impressions of what goes on. The way I understand it, there's a great deal of religious fervor at these things."

"I'm no man of the cloth."

"But you're a man of medicine, and that's what I need. You can tell me if these so-called cures are real. You know everyone around here, especially the sick ones."

"And if they are real?"

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"It will help support the thesis of my book that American ritual is a factor of immense psychological power."

"You're out of my depth," Madge admitted. "If you don't need me any more, Professor, I'll be running along."

He had a final smile for her. "Thank you, Madge. I'm certain your pictures and clippings will be a great help."

She glanced at me as she left, but if there was any special fondness in her look I ignored it. "Goodbye, Madge. See you around."

"Fine young lady," Hamus McLaughlin volunteered when we were alone. "Make somebody a good wife." I ignored that too.

So the following week I drove out to Hamus McLaughlin's house with my nurse April. "Imagine us goin' to this shindig, Dr. Sam," she said. "People see you there, they'll think you're gettin' ideas for new cures."

"I try to keep an open mind, April. Heaven knows I'd go along with anything that could cure someone like Phil Rafferty or Polly Aarons."

"I hear talk they're both goin' to be there tonight."

"I trust it's not raising false hopes." Rafferty was a man in his sixties with some sort of blood disease. Polly Aarons was almost crippled with back trouble. I hadn't been able to help either one, and I doubted if a seven-year-old child could. Still, there was McLaughlin's theory of rituals to consider.

"Here we are," April said. "Land sakes, you'd drive right by the house!"

"My mind was somewhere else."

"On the Miller girl, maybe? I hear you two were seen together the other night."

"On McLaughlin's front porch. Not exactly a trysting place." I left the motor of the Pierce-Arrow running as I hopped out and went to get the professor.

He answered the door on my first ring. "Good, good! I'm glad you could come early, Doctor. It'll give us an opportunity to speak with this man Yester before he starts performing."

The car only held two passengers, but April was used to straddling the bucket seats. "This is cozy," she decided. "Two handsome fellas."

McLaughlin chuckled. "Dr. Hawthorne, your nurse could make an old man young again."

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"She's all talk," I assured him. "And speaking of talk, what's the word around town about Yester and his boy? Fill us in on the gossip, April."

She loved it. "Well, I hear tell his present wife isn't the boy's mother. First wife walked out on him after the kid was born. But the current one's something to see—all red hair and lip rouge. Flashy New York clothes too. He keeps her under cover at collection time." April was an entirely different person when it came to gossip.

The tent came into view, and I was surprised at the number of cars in the rutted parking lot a full hour before the meeting. We parked around back and followed Professor McLaughlin as he strode purposefully into the big top. There was no circus inside, only some local men arranging rows of chairs on the dirt floor while a slim fellow with a pencil-thin mustache worked at positioning a life-size silver statue of a nearly nude woman holding a sword.

"Hi there," he said, seeing our approach.

"George Yester?"

"That's me." He was both younger and handsomer than I'd expected, the sort of dapper city slicker we country folk were forever being warned against. I wondered how this man could possibly cure anything, except maybe an overweight wallet. But then I remembered the boy.

Hamus McLaughlin had introduced us all, and as I shook Yester's hand I asked, "Is your son around?"

"No, no—he has to rest before the revivals. They take a lot out of him. You'll see him later." He stepped back to eye the statue, then moved it a bit to the left. "Like it? I call it the Angel of Good Health. My first wife posed for it." He tapped the figure's left shoulder. "It's just plaster, covered with silver paint. Makes it easy to transport in the back of our truck. The sword is real, though."

I touched the weapon, held loosely in the statue's right hand with its point resting against the wooden platform on which we stood. It was indeed a real sword. "Shouldn't she have it raised over her head?" I asked. "Doing battle with disease?" I wasn't about to take any of this hogwash seriously.

But Yester gave me a serious answer. "Tried it that way, but the weight of the sword unbalanced the statue. So I have her holding it down. This way the sword helps support the statue.

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Toby likes it. Sometimes I let him play with the sword."

"I wouldn't think he could lift it."

"He's a big boy for his age. Looks all of eight or nine."

Professor McLaughlin turned and stared out from the platform at the rows of empty wooden chairs. "Expecting a crowd?" he asked. He seemed to be getting the feel of the place, and imagining how it would look from the boy's vantage point.

"We'll fill it," Yester answered offhandedly. "Toby really brings them in. The child of God and the Angel of Good Health. You seen our handbills around town?"

"We've seen them," I answered dryly. I could understand why his first wife left him, even if I couldn't imagine any sensible girl marrying him in the first place. "You'll forgive me for being skeptical."

"Medical men always are," he said, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. "Toby and me, we bring the cures you can't accomplish."

"And the rituals," the professor added. "Perhaps Dr. Hawthorne would be more successful if he performed like an African witch doctor. And I say that in all seriousness."

"I can't tell you how Toby does it," his father said. "I've been doing revivals for years, but it was only last winter that I brought the boy into the act—the service—and let him perform. He was born to it. Now he wears a little white suit and looks like an angel himself."

"I wonder if you'd have a photograph of him," McLaughlin asked. "Like the one on the handbill. Something for my book."

Yester glanced at his watch. "See me afterwards. He'll even autograph it for you. They're coming in now."

We retreated to front-row seats where Professor McLaughlin could have a good view of the proceedings. Yester started off the platform but was intercepted by a flashy red-haired woman who waved her hands as she talked. "That's his wife," April whispered in my ear.

I grunted an acknowledgement, wondering what the woman's problem was. Maybe she was having trouble with the boy. Maybe he'd got his white suit dirty.

The citizens of Northmont filed in, almost filling the place. A few looked guiltily in my direction, as if their presence lent support to this rival healer. I smiled and waved. It was a theater, not a church.

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And presently the electric lights, hanging from the top of the tent, dimmed. The performance was about to begin. George Yester appeared on the wooden platform, billowing the side curtains as he came. He held his hands high toward heaven and proclaimed, "Today . . . is *Yester Day*!"

Nobody laughed.

I wondered if he'd managed to hypnotize them all while they stood in line. He'd barely appeared and he had the audience eating out of his hand. God help us all.

After a long introduction full of platitudes he directed our attention to the silver statue of the Angel of Good Health. The spotlight circled it while the rest of the platform went dark. Then, with a suddenness that was breathtaking, a boy in white stepped from behind the statue. Applause filled the tent. This was what they'd come for.

"Confess your sins," the boy intoned, "and I will make you whole again."

A phonograph record of some organ music came on, lending the proper mood to the event. I wondered if Yester's red-haired wife handled things like spotlights and Victrolas.

Then I saw them coming up the center aisle—the lame and the halt, the ill and the aged. My people, my patients. Coming to this child for the cure I could not find for them. And singing as they came.

It filled me with a fury I'd never known before, and it must have showed. I felt April's restraining hand on my arm. "Not now, Dr. Sam," she whispered.

Phil Rafferty was one of the first in line. He knelt as the boy laid on his hands, then struggled to his feet. I wondered if the blood disease that was wasting him had suddenly gone away. A few others came, even some I didn't know from nearby towns. Then I saw Polly Aarons, back bent with pain. She shrieked as Toby Yester's hands touched her.

And she straightened up.

Slowly, uncertainly—but she straightened up.

The audience went wild.

At my side Professor McLaughlin was busily making notes. "It's hardly surprising," he said above the roar of the crowd. "They always get one or two so-called cures."

The boy seemed unmoved by the demonstration. He went on to the others in line, resting his hands on them. Soon there came

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another scream and a woman fainted. The music grew louder.

Finally Toby finished. Without a word he bowed stiffly and walked off the platform. George Yester reappeared and gave a pitch for donations "to keep this fine work going." Then George and his red-haired wife passed along the rows of seats with collection baskets. I threw in a dime.

I figured that's what it was worth.

Outside, the crowd was still milling around, exchanging views on what they'd seen. I pushed my way through, leaving April and the professor behind, trying to reach Polly Aarons. Whatever had happened in there, she was still my patient.

When I found her she was leaning against a tree, head down, surrounded by a few friends. "What is it, Polly? What's wrong?"

"I . . . my back. It's not cured, Dr. Sam! It was only good for a few minutes and then it went out again. I didn't have enough faith!" She was starting to cry.

"Nonsense, Polly! He didn't cure you. The excitement of it—the anticipation—made you forget the pain and straighten up. But it was only temporary."

"I want to walk again like other people, Dr. Sam."

"And you will, I'm sure. But not with any help from that child." April had found us by then and I left her to comfort the woman.

"Where are you going?" Professor McLaughlin asked me.

"To find George Yester. Maybe I can't have him arrested for his performance in there, but I can certainly tell him what I think."

"Calm down."

I shook off his hand and strode rapidly across the rutted parking area. The cars and carriages were moving off now as people departed. I could see Sheriff Lens out near the road with a lantern, directing traffic onto the darkened lane, but I didn't stop to chat. Around the back of the big tent was a little trailer and a Packard car. I went directly to the lighted trailer and pounded on the door.

The red-haired woman came at once. "What is it?" she asked. Beyond her I could see the boy Toby stacking coins and bills from the night's collection.

"I want to see your husband."

"George is in the tent, packing up our things. What do you want with him?" She seemed frightened, and my anger had to be clearly visible. Without a word I turned toward the tent.

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George Yester was in there all right, all alone, packing up the Victrola and spotlight that had been used in the performance. He turned to me, standing before the platform with its statue of the Angel of Good Health, and said, "Enjoy the show, Doctor?" The expression on his face made me want to hit him.

"Not particularly."

"Oh? Too bad. It was a good audience."

"Good for the collection baskets?"

"You saw a woman cured," Yester answered.

"And I saw her writhing in pain just now in the lot outside. Your cures don't last too long."

"Perhaps her faith was weak."

"I wish I could have you arrested for what you've done here!"

"Arrested? For bringing a little hope, a little comfort, to these ignorant people?"

Then I did hit him. I brought my right fist up and connected with his jaw, sending him over backward. He looked startled as he hit the ground. I turned without another word and headed down the aisle toward the rear of the tent.

I was almost to the entrance when I heard him scream. I turned, wondering what had happened, and saw him still lying there in front of the platform.

But now the silver sword from the statue's hand was embedded in his chest.

And there was no one else in the tent.

I ran to him, pulled the sword free, tried to dam the flow of blood with my handkerchief. His eyelids flickered once and then he was gone.

I stayed there on my knees, unable to believe what had happened. There was nothing but row upon row of empty chairs. No movement, no sound except the wheezing of air as it escaped from the dead man's chest. I looked at the sword and examined it, aware that my fingerprints were already on the haft.

There was nothing to do but call Sheriff Lens. I hoped he was still in the parking lot with his lantern.

I walked to the rear of the tent once more and lifted the flap. Yes, the lantern was waving away the last of the departing audience. No one but me had heard Yester's dying scream. "Sheriff Lens," I shouted, not wanting to leave the tent. "Over here—quick!"

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"What's the trouble, Doc?" he called back.

"Come here and I'll tell you. It's important."

He trotted over, moving faster than usual. "What's up?"

"George Yester has been murdered."

"Come on now!"

"See for yourself." I held open the tent flap and he entered, giving a low whistle when he spotted Yester's body in front of the platform.

"How'd it happen, Doc?"

I told him everything I knew, starting with the revival meeting itself and my attendance with Professor McLaughlin.

"Where's the professor now?" he asked.

"Outside, I suppose. With April."

"Any possibility the sword was jarred loose from the statue when you knocked Yester down?"

"An accident, you mean? I wish it could have happened that way. But the point of the sword was resting against this platform. Even if it fell over on him the haft would have hit him. There's no way the blade could have gone into his chest accidentally. I pulled it out, remember. It was driven almost through him."

"You tellin' me the statue came to life and killed him?"

"Hardly. But someone removed the sword and plunged it into him as he sprawled there."

"An' your fingerprints are on it."

"I told you that. I pulled it out of the wound, trying to save his life."

"And you were angry with him. You admit hitting him and knocking him down."

"Yes."

"And there was no one else in the tent."

"No."

Sheriff Lens shook his head. I could see what he was thinking. He stepped onto the platform and put both arms around the silver statue, lifting it off to the hard ground. "Lighter than I expected."

"It's silver-painted plaster. Yester told us that. What are you doing?"

"Only place somebody could hide is under this wooden platform. I'm gonna have me a look-see."

The platform, about 12 feet square and 18 inches high, was enclosed on all sides. It merely rested on the ground and the sheriff lifted it easily. There was nothing underneath but more

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hard-packed earth. "I could have told you no one was hidden there," I said. "How could they have got out without toppling the statue on the platform?"

He stood up and looked around some more, his attention attracted now by the curtains on either side of the platform. "Could anyone have been hiding back here, Doc?"

"I'll admit I didn't look, but what if they were? I walked down that aisle for maybe fifteen seconds before Yester screamed. Then I turned instantly. There was no one in sight. It's doubtful the killer could have come out of hiding, crossed the platform, removed the sword from the statue's hand, and stabbed Yester—all in fifteen seconds. And it's absolutely impossible that he could have vanished into thin air as I turned around."

Sheriff Lens grunted, bending low to examine the ground. "Too packed down to show footprints. Maybe Yester killed himself, Doc."

"With a sword that long? Even if he could have managed it, he couldn't have driven the blade that deeply into his body. No, it was done by someone standing above him, thrusting downward." As I spoke my eyes turned up, toward the top of the tent, but there was nothing to be seen except the electric cords for the rows of dim hanging light bulbs.

"Doc, don't you see I'm tryin' to give you a way out? Hell, I don't want to arrest you!"

"Arrest me!" I hadn't seriously considered the prospect till that moment.

"You had the motive and the opportunity, Doc. And by your own account no one else coulda done it."

"But I'm innocent! I didn't kill—"

I was interrupted by the sudden appearance of George Yester's wife. She burst into the tent, obviously in search of him. "*George*!" she screamed when she saw the body. "George, what have they done to you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Sheriff Lens said. "We were just coming to tell you. Someone's killed your husband."

She fell sobbing by the body then, and I had to gently pull her away. "There's nothing we could do," I said softly. "He died instantly."

She glared at me, her brown eyes flashing. "Nothing you could do, maybe. But his boy can do something! Toby can bring him back!" And she ran from the tent before we could prevent her.

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"Stop her, Sheriff! We can't let her bring the boy in here."

"Come on."

We met them at the back of the tent, and Sheriff Lens barred the way. Young Toby simply stood there, trembling, not fully understanding what had happened. Finally the red-haired woman calmed down and led the boy back to their trailer.

No one could bring George Yester back. Not now.

"All right, Sheriff," I said with a sigh. "Now you can arrest me if you want to."

But he didn't arrest me, not quite yet. We'd been through too much together for him to seriously believe me capable of murder. He told me the case would be presented to the county grand jury, and I'd be free until an indictment was returned. That gave me a few days, at least, though I didn't know just what I'd do with them. The suspects were at once too many and too few. Anyone in the audience might have slipped back into the tent and killed Yester. But how? And why?

I started out with Phil Rafferty, because I hadn't seen him in the crowd outside the tent. Phil worked at the post office in town, when his blood condition didn't weaken him to the point of exhaustion, and I found him there the morning after the killing.

He looked at me a bit sheepishly and said, "I didn't really believe all that mumbo-jumbo last night, Dr. Sam. But my wife insisted I had to go."

"How are you feeling today?"

"About the same, I guess. I'm still able to work and I'm thankful for that."

"Tell me, did you notice anything unusual during or after the performance? Anything that might be a clue to this thing?"

"Sure did! In fact, I was goin' to tell the sheriff about it today. We were one of the last buggies out of the lot, because I wanted the cars to go first. Our horse Nelly shies at cars. Anyway, just before we pulled out I seen a figure runnin' from the tent, off toward the woods."

"Man or woman?"

"Couldn't tell. It was wearin' a long cape of some sort, reaching to the ground, and a hood over the head. You know, like monks wear."

"A cowl."

"Yeah, I guess so. Thought it was strange, and this mornin'

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when I heard about the killing I decided the sheriff should know."

"You tell him, Phil. And thanks for the information."

I went away thinking that the likelihood of a cowled monk sneaking around the tent was about as bizarre as the murder itself. Still, Phil Rafferty must have seen something.

Back at the office I talked to April and learned that she'd lost Professor McLaughlin in the crowd the previous night. She hadn't seen him at all after we reached Polly Aarons. "I should go have a talk with him," I decided. "He was looking around and making notes. Maybe he spotted something the rest of us missed."

I was to get there sooner than I'd planned. Not ten minutes later there was a call from Madge Miller. I hadn't seen her since the night at McLaughlin's home and now her voice was high and distraught. "Dr. Sam, I'm at the professor's house! He's been attacked—come quick!"

"Attacked?"

"He's unconscious and bleeding, and the house is a mess!"

"I'm on my way. Call Sheriff Lens."

The sheriff and I arrived at the house together. We found Madge in the professor's den, bathing his gashed forehead with a cold towel. He was conscious now, but still dazed. "I came over to see him and the front door was ajar," Madge said. "I found him like this."

I glanced around at the spilled papers and open desk drawers. His assailant had obviously been searching for something. "Can you talk now?" I asked as his eyes flickered open. I could see the wound wasn't serious.

"I—I think so. What time is it?"

"Ten thirty. How long have you been unconscious?"

"I heard a noise early this morning, before daybreak. I came down to see what it was and somebody hit me over the head. That's all I know."

"Did you get a look at him?" Sheriff Lens asked, making notes.

"Not a glimpse. I was hit from behind."

"This cut's on your forehead," I observed. "But you probably got it when you fell." I could feel a swollen bump under his hair. "You'd better get to bed till I can check you over."

"What did they take?" he asked, his eyes focusing finally on the strewn papers.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe they couldn't find what they wanted."

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Sheriff Lens helped me get McLaughlin to his feet. "Think it's connected with the killing, Doc?"

"That's a possibility." Though at the moment I couldn't see the connection. What was it the professor had observed that could endanger the killer? Hadn't I seen everything he had?

We got Hamus McLaughlin up to bed and I left him having a glass of bootleg whiskey. He seemed no worse for his encounter with the sneak thief. Sheriff Lens stayed on to examine a broken side window by which the thief had gained entry.

On the way back to my office I stopped by to see Polly Aarons. She was resting comfortably, but the momentary cure that ignited the revival meeting had not returned. Her back was no better. I left her and drove out to the fairgrounds once more.

Mrs. Yester was busy packing the trailer and it was obvious she and the boy would soon be leaving. "We didn't really meet last night," I said. "My name's Sam Hawthorne."

She looked at me dully and I noticed that her red hair was wild and uncombed. It had been a hard night for her. "I'm Sue Yester, but I guess you know that. Some say you killed my husband."

"No, I didn't kill him."

"You're a doctor, huh?"

"Yes. Could I talk to you about George?"

The boy Toby came to the door of the trailer but she chased him inside. "There's nothin' for him to hear. He's heard too much already. What are your questions?"

"Know anyone around here who'd want your husband dead?"

"Only someone like you. We always had trouble with country doctors."

"How long you been doing this?"

"He was holding revival meetings before I knew him. Got started back in Ohio when the boy was born. I hooked up with him four years ago, but Toby didn't get into the act till last year. He was a big hit—the greatest thing ever happened to George."

"Do you believe Toby can cure people of their ills?"

"I wanted to believe it last night. I wanted to believe he could bring George back. But I guess I never did really think so. Toby's just a boy, like other boys. He doesn't cure anyone, but sometimes in the excitement of it all they cure themselves."

She was a wiser woman than I would have believed. I had no more questions to ask her. She'd given me the final piece of the puzzle.

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"We have to go back out to Professor McLaughlin's house," I told Sheriff Lens. "The answer is there."

He took a deep breath. "I'm gettin' a lot of complaints about not arrestin' you, Doc. If you don't clear this thing up quick I might have to take you in."

"I think we'll clear it up this noon."

The professor was sitting up in a chair when we arrived, supervising Madge Miller while she tried to straighten the study and sort out his scattered papers. "Still don't know what's missing," he told us. "A lot of these things were research materials I hadn't got around to yet. But who in hell would want them?"

I sat down opposite him. "Professor, I think I know who killed George Yester. I came here to tell you first, because you were there with me last night."

Sheriff Lens shifted uneasily. "Get on with it, Doc."

"Well, the big problem in my mind was *how*? How could Yester be stabbed with that sword almost before my eyes? I figured if I got the *how* I'd know the *who*. The killer had to be close enough that he could get the sword, stab Yester, and resume his hiding place all before I turned around. He might have waited till I left, but by killing Yester in my presence he had a ready-made suspect. Naturally he'd seen me punch Yester and knock him down."

"There was no hiding place," Sheriff Lens insisted. "You told me so yourself."

"There was one I never considered. Behind that silver statue! The killer stepped around it, took the sword, plunged it into the fallen man's chest, and stepped back behind the statue. He made his escape when I went to call you, Sheriff."

"Behind the statue!" Lens scoffed. "There's no room behind it! What was he—a midget?"

"No—a seven-year-old boy."

"Toby!"

"Exactly. Remember, Professor, how we saw him appear from behind the statue last evening during the performance? And remember Yester telling us how he played with the silver sword? I suppose the boy was rebelling against the life that had been forced on him, rebelling against a father whose love depended on the size of the nightly collections. There's no other way it could have been done. Only Toby Yester could have hidden behind that statue and killed his father."

And then I turned and looked directly into the ashen face of

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Madge Miller. Her mouth was working, but no words were coming out. "Did you want to say something, Madge?" I prompted. "Before the sheriff goes out to arrest Toby?"

"Damn you, Sam!" she screamed. "*You know*!"

"Know what, Madge?" I asked quietly.

"Toby didn't do it. I killed George Yester."

I told April about it later, back in the office. "I didn't feel any triumph when she said those words, April. I felt sad for us all."

"Dr. Sam, you mean she confessed just to save the boy from being accused? I don't understand it."

"She killed for him in the first place, so I knew she'd confess to save him. You see, Madge Miller is Toby's mother."

"My God! How'd you find that out?"

"Lots of guesswork, April. We knew Toby's real mother—Yester's first wife—had left him after the boy was born. Sue Yester told me today this was in Ohio, and I knew Madge went to college in Ohio. The dates were right too—Madge would have been twenty-one or twenty-two when the boy was born, since she just turned twenty-nine. Probably a senior in college when she got involved with George Yester. I suppose seeing what he was doing to her son was more than she could bear. Even though she'd walked out on them she felt she had to rescue Toby. And the only way to do it was to destroy George Yester like some avenging angel."

"How, Dr. Sam? You were right there. How could she have killed him without you seeing her?"

"Oh, I saw her, April. I must have looked right at her. But I didn't notice her. Sheriff Lens pegged it right last night when he asked me if that silver statue came alive. Because that's exactly what happened, you see. For a few crucial minutes Madge Miller became that statue."

"Dr. Sam!" Clearly she didn't believe me.

"It's fantastic, April, but not impossible. Once in Boston I saw models posed in a department-store window, standing for twenty minutes without moving a muscle. I remembered something Madge told me just last week. She said once Professor McLaughlin visited her classroom and intimidated her so much she just froze. She said she hadn't stood so still since she rode her sorority's float in the college homecoming parade. I remembered that later and thought it was odd, because people riding floats in

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parades usually wave to the spectators. If she was frozen on the float maybe it was because she was imitating a statue. I remembered seeing things like that in my own college days—a pretty coed painted gold or silver and imitating a statue. Sometimes the paint clogged their pores and made them sick."

"But certainly Yester and you would know a real girl from a statue!"

"Would we? The spotlight was already disconnected, remember. There were only the strings of dim bulbs at the top of the tent. And we had no reason to look at the statue. As for its size and general appearance, Yester told me himself that his first wife modeled for the statue. The Angel of Good Health was Madge Miller. I suppose seeing her on that sorority float gave him the idea for the statue in the first place."

"Did she tell you all this?"

"She told us enough. She first heard about Yester's appearance in Northmont last week at McLaughlin's house. I remember now how the news seemed to upset and anger her. She brooded about it all week and decided she had to kill her ex-husband to free Toby from this life as a false messiah. Among her college souvenirs she still had the tube of silver paint she'd used in the parade. Though the statue's face didn't look that much like her, the body was still hers. She was sure she could take its place after the performance, when she knew Yester would come back alone to pack up his gear. She wanted to kill him that way, like an avenging angel, like a statue come to life. She wanted to see his expression. I suppose the thought of her son, of abandoning him to Yester, had made her a little bit mad on the subject.

"Anyway, she rubbed herself all over with the silver paint and sneaked into the tent as the performance was ending. She wore a long robe with a hood, to hide her silvery near-nudity, and that's what Phil Rafferty saw as she made her escape. She hid the real statue behind the curtains—it was easy to lift—and took its place, sword in hand. Before she could kill Yester I walked in and started arguing with him. When I knocked him down she saw her chance and plunged the sword into him. He screamed, of course, and she had to freeze in position again when I turned around.

"She must have had some anxious moments then, but I was more interested in saving the man's life if I could. I never looked closely at the statue. When I went to call Sheriff Lens she lifted the real statue back onto the platform and made her escape."

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"What about Professor McLaughlin? Did she attack him too?"

I nodded. "There were homecoming pictures in the scrapbook she left him, including one of her on the float. He hadn't looked at them yet, but she had to take back that picture before he saw it and connected it with the killing. He heard her in his study and she had to knock him out. Then she scattered everything around to make it look as if the thief had been searching for something. She didn't want to harm McLaughlin, though, so she returned this morning to find him and phone me for help."

April just sat there shaking her head. "And the boy, Toby?"

"I think it's best that he never knows about this. Sue Yester isn't a bad sort, and maybe she can get him back to leading a normal life."

". . . and that was all of it," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded. "Toby Yester grew up to become a successful night-club entertainer under another name, and he never knew his real mother had killed his father. Madge simply went to pieces after her confession. She was never well enough mentally to stand trial. And we didn't have any more revival meetings in Northmont. Funny thing, though—you know Phil Rafferty? His blood disease pretty much went away after that. I never understood why.

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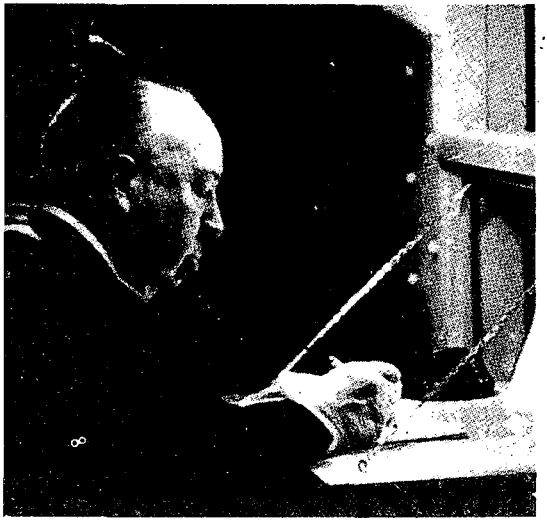

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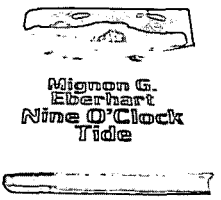

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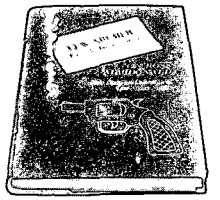

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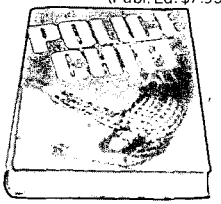

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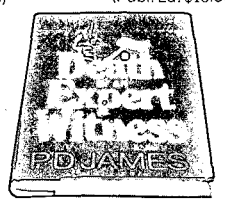

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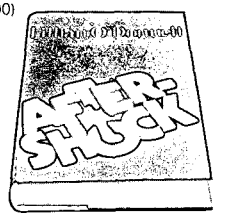

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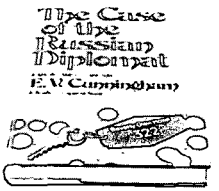

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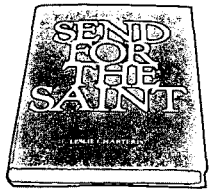

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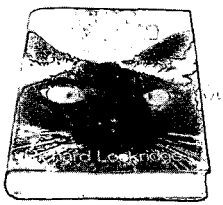

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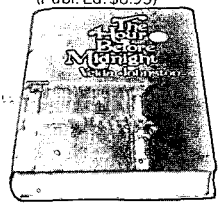

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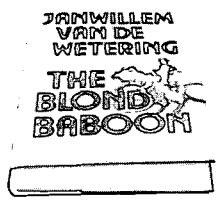

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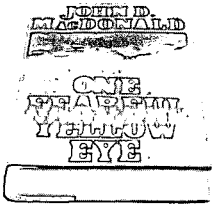

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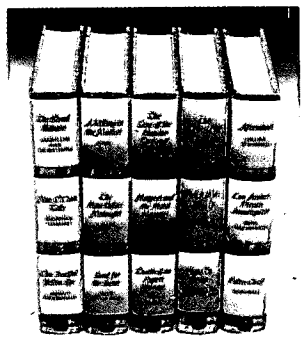

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